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ROMANCISTS

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THE ROMANCISTS

ALFRED DE MUSSET

THE CONFESSION
OF A CHILD OF THE CENTURY



Part First Chapter IX

*I looked at her without saying a word, and my eyes were filled with tears; she noticed this, and asked me why, but I could not answer her; * * * she took out her handkerchief, and, while supping very pleasantly, she wiped my face from time to time.*

BIBLIOTHÈQUE
DES CHEFS-D'ŒUVRE
DU ROMAN
CONTEMPORAIN

*THE CONFESSION OF A CHILD
OF THE CENTURY*

ALFRED DE MUSSET
OF THE ACADEMIE FRANÇAISE

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THIS EDITION OF THE
CONFESSION OF A CHILD OF THE
CENTURY

HAS BEEN COMPLETELY TRANSLATED

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THE
CONFESSION OF A CHILD
OF THE CENTURY

PART FIRST

PART FIRST

I

To write the history of one's life, one must first have lived it; and so it is not my own that I write.

Having been afflicted, while yet young, with an abominable moral malady, I relate what happened to me during three years. If I were the only one sick, I would say nothing about it; but as there are many others besides myself, who suffer from the same disease, I write for them, while not too sure that they will pay any attention to it; for, in case no one should take warning therefrom, I shall still have derived this benefit from my words, that I shall have cured myself more effectually, and, like the fox caught in the trap, I shall have gnawed my captive paw.

II

During the wars of the Empire, whilst husbands and brothers were in Germany, uneasy mothers had given birth to an ardent, pale, nervous generation. Conceived between two battles, brought up in the colleges to the beating of drums, thousands of children looked at themselves and one another with a gloomy eye, while trying their puny muscles: From time to time their blood-stained fathers appeared, raised them to their gold-bedizened breasts, then put them down again and remounted on horseback.

One man only was then the life of Europe; all other beings tried to fill their lungs with the air that he had breathed. Each year France made to that man a present of three hundred thousand young men; that was the tax paid to Cæsar, and, if he had not that flock supporting him, he could not follow out his fortune. It was the escort that he needed to traverse the world, and to go and perish in a little valley of a desert island, under a weeping willow.

Never were there so many sleepless nights as in that man's time; never was such a people of disconsolate mothers seen reclining on city ramparts; never was there such silence around those who spoke of death. And yet never was there so much joy, so much life, so

much flourishing of war trumpets in every court. Never were there suns so cloudless as those that dried up all that blood. People said that God had made them for that man, and people called them his suns of Austerlitz. But he, indeed, made them himself with his ever thundering cannon, which left clouds only on the morrow of his battles.

It was the air of that spotless sky, in which shone so much glory, in which glittered so much steel, that children then breathed. They knew well that they were destined for the hecatombs; but they regarded Murat as invulnerable, and people had seen the Emperor pass over a bridge amid the whizzing of so many balls that they knew not whether he could die. And even should one have to die, what was that? Death itself was then so beautiful, so grand, so magnificent in its smoking purple! It so closely resembled hope, it mowed down such green ears, that it was as if it had become young, and that one no longer believed in old age. Every cradle in France was a buckler, and so, also, was every coffin; verily there were no more old men, there were only corpses or demi-gods.

Yet, one day, the immortal Emperor was to look from a hill at seven peoples cutting one another's throats; as he did not yet know whether he was to be the master of the world or only of half of it, Azrael passed by the way, he grazed the tip of his wing and thrust him into the ocean. At the splash of his fall, the moribund

powers sat up in their beds of suffering, and, reaching out their hooked claws, all the royal spiders cut up Europe, and of Cæsar's purple, made for themselves a Harlequin's garment.

Just as a traveler, as long as he is on his way, rushes on night and day in rain and in sunshine, regardless of his vigils or of his dangers, but as soon as he has arrived in the bosom of his family and is seated before the fire, feels extremely weary and can scarcely drag himself to bed: so France, as Cæsar's widow, suddenly felt her wound. She fell in a swoon, and slept so deep a sleep that her old kings, believing her dead, enveloped her in a white winding-sheet. The old gray-haired army retired exhausted from fatigue, and the fires were rekindled in sorrow in the deserted chateaus.

Then those men of the empire, who had run so much and cut so many throats, embraced their emaciated wives and spoke of their first loves; they looked at themselves in the fountains of their natal meadows, and they saw themselves so old, so mutilated, that they recalled their sons, so that one might close their eyes. They asked where they were; the children left college, and, no longer seeing either sabres, or cuirasses, or infantry, or troopers, they, in their turn, asked where their fathers were. But they received for answer that the war was ended, that Cæsar was dead, and that the portraits of Wellington and Blücher were hung in the

antechambers of consulates and embassies, with these two words at the bottom : *Salvatoribus mundi*.

Then a moody youth sat down on a world in ruins. All these children were drops of a boiling blood that had inundated the land ; they were born in the midst of war, for war. They had dreamt for fifteen years of the snows of Moscow and of the sun of the Pyramids. They had not gone out from their cities ; but they had been told that, through each barrier of these cities, one went to a European capital. They had a whole world in their heads ; they looked at earth, sky, streets, and roads ; all that was void, and their parish bells alone resounded in the distance.

Dim phantoms, clad in dark robes, slowly traversed the fields ; others knocked at the doors of the houses, and, as soon as these had been opened to them, they drew from their pockets large, well-worn parchments, with which they drove out the inhabitants. From all sides came men still trembling with the fear that had seized them on their departure, twenty years before. All claimed, disputed, and clamored ; people were astonished that a single death could bring so many crows.

The king of France was on his throne, looking here and there lest he might spy a bee in his tapestry. Some extended their hats to him, and he gave them money ; others showed him a crucifix and he kissed it ; others were satisfied with calling great resounding names in his ear, and he replied that they should go

into his great hall, that its echoes were sonorous; still others showed him their old cloaks, as they had thoroughly wiped the bees from them, and to those he gave a new garment.

The children looked upon all that, ever thinking that Cæsar's shade was going to disembark at Cannes and breathe on these larvæ; but silence still continued, and people saw floating in the heavens only the paleness of the lilies. When the children spoke of glory, they were told: "Become priests;" when they spoke of ambition: "Become priests!"

Meanwhile there mounted to the tribune a man who held in his hand a contract between king and people; he began to say that glory was a noble thing, and the ambition of war also; but that there was one thing yet more noble, and its name was Liberty.

The children raised their heads and remembered their grandfathers, who had also spoken of it. They remembered having met, in the dark corners of their father's house, mysterious marble busts with long hair and a Roman inscription; they remembered having seen of an evening, while sitting up together, their grandmothers shaking their heads and speaking of a river of blood far more terrible than that of the Emperor. In that word Liberty there was for them something that made their hearts beat, something at once like a distant and terrible reminiscence and also like a cherished hope, still more distant.

They bounded as they heard it; but on returning home they saw three baskets being carried to Clamart :¹ they were three young men who had pronounced the word Liberty too loudly.

A strange smile played upon their lips at this sad sight; but other haranguers, mounting the tribune, began to calculate publicly what ambition cost and that glory was very dear; they pointed out the horror of war and spoke of the hecatombs as butcheries. And they spoke so much and so long that all human illusions, like trees in autumn, fell leaf by leaf around them, and that those who listened to them passed their hands over their foreheads like the fever-stricken when waking up.

Some said: "What caused the Emperor's fall was that the people wanted no more of him;" others: "The people wanted the king; no, liberty; no, reason; no, religion; no, the English constitution; no, absolutism;" a last added: "No, nothing of all that, but rest."

Three elements, then, shared the life that was at that time presented to the young; behind them, a past forever destroyed, still quivering on its ruins, with all the fossils of the ages of absolutism; before them, the dawn of an immense horizon, the first rays of the future; and between these two worlds — something like the ocean that separates the old continent from young America, something indescribably vague and wavering, a rolling sea full of wrecks, traversed from time to time by some distant white sail or by some ship puffing a

heavy vapor—the present age, in a word, which separates the past from the future, which is neither the one nor the other, and which resembles both at the same time, and in which one knows not, at each step that one takes, whether one is walking on a seedling or on a ruin.

Such was the chaos in which one had then to choose; that it was that presented itself to children full of strength and daring, to the sons of the Empire and to the grandsons of the Revolution.

Now, of the past they wanted no more, for faith in nothing is assured; the future they loved, but how! as Pygmalion did Galatea: it was to them as a marble lover, and they waited for her to become animated, for the blood to color her veins.

There remained to them, then, the present, the spirit of the age, an angel of the twilight that is neither night nor day; they found it seated on a lime-sack filled with bones, enclosed in the mantle of the egoists, and shivering from a terrible cold. The anguish of death entered their soul at the sight of this spectre half mummy, half foetus; they approached it like the traveler to whom one shows at Strasburg the daughter of an old Comte de Sarvenden, embalmed in her bridal decking: that infantile skeleton makes one shudder, for its spare and livid hands wear the betrothal ring, and its head falls in dust amid orange blossoms.

As on the approach of a storm there passes through the forest a terrible wind that makes all the trees shudder,

to which succeeds a deep silence: so Napoléon had shaken everything as he passed over the world; kings had felt their crowns vacillating, and, raising their hands to their heads, found only their hair, erect from fright. The Pope had journeyed three hundred leagues to bless him in God's name and to place his diadem on him; but Napoléon had taken it from his hands. Thus everything had trembled in that dismal forest of old Europe; then silence had succeeded.

It is said that when one meets a mad dog, if one has the courage to walk gravely, without turning back, and in a steady manner, the dog is satisfied with following you for a certain time growling between his teeth; while, if one allows a sign of terror to escape, if one walks too quickly, he throws himself on one and devours one; for, once the first bite is made, there is no way of escaping him.

Now, in the history of Europe it has often happened that a sovereign has shown this sign of terror and that his people have devoured him; but, if one had done so, all had not done it at the same time, that is, a king had disappeared, but not the royal majesty. In the presence of Napoléon the royal majesty had made that gesture which loses all, not only majesty, but religion, nobility, every divine and human power.

Napoléon being dead, the divine and human powers were indeed restored in fact; but belief in them no longer existed. There is a terrible danger in knowing

what is possible, for the mind is ever advancing farther. It is one thing to say : "That might be," and another : "This has been," which is the first bite by the dog.

Napoléon, the despot, was the last glimmer of the lamp of despotism ; he destroyed and parodied kings, as Voltaire had done the sacred books. And after him a great noise was heard : it was the rock of St. Helena that had just fallen on the old world. At once appeared in the heavens the glacial star of reason, and its rays, like to those of the cold goddess of night, shedding light without heat, enveloped the world in a livid shroud.

Hitherto, indeed, people had been seen who hated nobles, who declaimed against priests, who conspired against kings ; people had indeed raised an outcry against abuses and prejudices ; but it was a great novelty to see the people smiling at it. If a noble, or a priest, or a sovereign passed, the peasants who had made war began to toss the head and say : "Ah ! we have seen that man in due time and place ; he had a different look." And when one spoke of the throne and of the altar, they replied : "They are four wooden staves ; we have nailed and unnailed them." And when one said to them : "People, you have returned from the errors that had led you astray ; you have called for your kings and your priests," they replied : "It was not we, it was those babblers." And when one said to them : "People, forget the past, work and obey," they settled themselves again on their seats, and a dull clatter was heard.

It was a rusty and notched sword that had moved in a corner of the cabin. Then they immediately added: "Be at rest, at least; if they do not injure you, do not try to inflict injury." Alas! they were satisfied with that.

But the youth were not satisfied with this. Certain it is that there are in man two occult powers that fight to the death: the one, clear-sighted and cold, attaches itself to the reality, calculates it, weighs it, and judges the past; the other is thirsty for the future and launches into the unknown. When passion carries man away, reason follows him weeping and warning him of the danger; but as soon as man has stopped at the voice of reason, as soon as he has said to himself: "True, I am a fool, whither am I going?" passion cries out to him: "And as for me, I, then, am going to die?"

A feeling of inexpressible unrest then began to ferment in all young hearts. Condemned to repose by the sovereigns of the world, given up to vulgar pedantries of all sorts, to laziness and to lassitude, young men saw receding from them the foaming billows against which they had prepared their arms. All these oil-rubbed gladiators felt an unbearable wretchedness in the depths of their souls. The richest became libertines; those of moderate fortune adopted a calling, and resigned themselves either to the gown or to the sword; the poorest heedlessly rushed into enthusiasm, into tall talk, into the frightful sea of aimless action. As human weakness

seeks association and as men are gregarious by nature, politics became mixed up with them. People went to fight with the body-guards on the steps of the legislative chamber, people rushed to the theatrical performance in which Talma wore a wig that made him look like Cæsar, people crowded to the burial of a Liberal deputy. But of the members of both opposing parties there was not one who, on returning home, did not bitterly feel the void of his existence and the poverty of his hands.

Just at the time when public life was so colorless and so mean, the private life of society took on a sombre and silent aspect; the most rigid hypocrisy reigned in morals; English ideas being added to devotion, even gaiety had disappeared. Perhaps it was Providence that was already preparing its new ways, perhaps it was the courier-angel of future conditions of society who was already sowing in the hearts of women the germs of the human independence that they will one day claim. But it is certain that suddenly, a thing unheard of, in the Paris salons, the men pass down one side and the women the other; and thus, the one clad in white like brides, the others in black like orphans, they began to gauge each other with their eyes.

Let no one be mistaken about it: this black dress worn by the men of our time is a terrible symbol; to get to that it was necessary for armor to fall piece by piece and embroidery flower by flower. It is human

reason that has overthrown all illusions; but it wears mourning itself, in order that it may be consoled.

The manners of students and artists, those manners so free, so fine, so full of youth, felt the universal change. Men, by separating from women, had whispered a word that mortally wounds,—contempt. They had flung themselves into wine and into the society of courtesans. Students and artists also flung themselves therein: love was treated like glory and religion; it was an old illusion. People went, then, to places of ill-repute; the *grisette*, that class so dreamy, so romantic, and of a love so tender and so sweet, saw herself abandoned to the shop counters. She was poor, and she was no longer loved; she wanted to have dresses and hats, she sold herself. O misery! the young man who should have loved her, whom she would have loved herself; he who formerly brought her to the woods of Verrières and of Romainville, to dances on the grass, to suppers under the leafy shade; he who came to chat at evening under the lamp, at the farther end of the shop, during the long winter evening vigils; he who shared with her her morsel of bread steeped in the sweat of her brow, and her sublime and poor love; he, that same man, after having forsaken her, found her again some evening on an orgie in the inner recesses of a brothel, pale and dull, forever lost, with hunger on her lips and prostitution in her heart!

Now, about that time two poets, the two finest geniuses of the age following that of Napoléon, had just devoted their lives to collecting all the elements of anguish and sorrow scattered through the universe. Goethe, the patriarch of a new literature, after having depicted in Werther the passion that leads to suicide, had traced in his Faust the darkest human figure that ever represented evil and misfortune. His writings then began to pass from Germany into France. From the seclusion of his study, surrounded by paintings and statues, rich, happy, and peaceful, he looked on with a paternal smile at his work of darkness coming to us. Byron answered him with an exclamation of sorrow that made Greece bound, and suspended Manfred over the abyss, as if nothingness had been the solution of the hideous riddle that enveloped him.

Pardon me, O great poets, who are now but mere ashes resting underground ! pardon me ! you are demigods, and I am only a suffering child. But in writing all this, I cannot help cursing you. Why did you not sing the perfume of the flowers, the voices of nature, hope, and love, the vine and the sun, azure and beauty ? No doubt you were acquainted with life, and no doubt you had suffered, and the world crumbled around you, and you wept over its ruins, and you despaired ; and your mistresses had betrayed, and your friends calumniated, and your fellow-countrymen slighted you ; and you had a void in your heart, death in your eyes, and you

were of the colossi of sorrow. But tell me, you, noble Goethe, was there no more consoling voice in the religious murmur of your old German forests? You to whom beautiful poesy was the sister of science, could these not of their two selves find in immortal nature a plant salutary to the heart of their favorite? You who were a pantheist, an antique poet of Greece, a lover of sacred forms, could you not put a little honey in those fine vases that you knew how to make, you who had only to smile and to let the bees come upon your lips? And you, and you, Byron, did you not have near Ravenna, under your Italian orange-trees, under your beautiful Venetian sky, near your dear Adriatic, did you not have your dearly beloved? O God, I who speak to you, and who am only a weak child, I have perhaps known evils that you have not suffered, and yet I believe in hope, and yet I bless God.

When English and German ideas thus passed over our heads, it was as a gloomy and silent disgust, followed by a terrible convulsion. For to formulate general ideas is to change saltpetre into gunpowder, and the Homeric brain of the great Goethe had sucked, alembic-like, all the juices from the forbidden fruit. Those who did not read him, then believed that they knew nothing. Poor creatures! the explosion carried them away like grains of dust into the abyss of universal doubt.

It was like a denying of all things of heaven and of earth, which one may call disenchantment, or, if one

wish, *despair*; as if humanity in lethargy had been thought dead by those who tried its pulse. Just like that soldier of whom one asked of old: "In what do you believe?" and who first answered: "In myself;" so the youth of France, hearing this question, first replied: "In nothing."

From that time there were formed, as it were, two camps: on the one side exalted, suffering minds, all the expansive souls that need the infinite, bent their heads weeping; they enveloped themselves in sickly dreams, and one no longer saw but frail reeds on an ocean of bitterness. On the other side the men of flesh remained erect, inflexible, amid positive enjoyments, and they took no other care than to count the money that they had. It was only a sob and a burst of laughter, the one coming from the soul, the other from the body.

This, then, is what the soul said:

"Alas! alas! religion is going; the clouds of heaven fall in rain; we no longer have either hope or expectation, not even two little bits of black wood in the form of a cross before which to extend our hands. The star of the future is hardly rising; it cannot pass the horizon; it remains enveloped in clouds, and, like the sun in winter, its disk there appears of a blood-red, which it has kept since '93. There is no more love, there is no more glory. What a thick night on the earth! And we shall be dead when day shall break."

This, then, is what the body said:

“Man is here below to make use of his senses; he has more or fewer pieces of white metal, with which he is entitled to more or less esteem. To eat, to drink, and to sleep, is to live! As for the bonds that exist between men, friendship consists in loaning money; but it is rare to have a friend whom one can love enough for that. Relationship serves for inheritances; love is an exercise of the body; the only intellectual enjoyment is vanity.”

Like to the Asiatic plague exhaled from the vapors of the Ganges, terrible *despair* was stalking over the earth with giant strides. Already Chateaubriand, a prince of poesy, enveloping the horrible idol with his pilgrim's cloak, had placed it on a marble altar, amid the perfumes of the sacred censers. Already, full of a henceforth useless strength, the children of the age were stiffening their lazy hands and were drinking the poisoned brewing from their sterile cup. Everything was already spoiling, when the jackals emerged from earth. A cadaverous and infected literature, which had only form, but a hideous form, began to bedew all the monsters of nature with a fetid blood.

Who will ever dare to relate what took place then in the colleges? Men doubted everything: young men denied everything. Poets sang despair: young men left the schools with the brow serene, the visage fresh and ruddy, and blasphemy in their mouths. Moreover, the French character, by nature gay and open, still

predominating, the brains were easily filled with English and German ideas; but the hearts, too light to struggle and to suffer, withered like broken flowers. Thus the principle of death descended coldly and without shock from the head to the entrails. Instead of possessing the enthusiasm of evil, we had only the abnegation of good; instead of despair, insensibility. Children of fifteen, seated carelessly under flowering shrubs, for pastime carried on conversations that would have made the insensible groves of Versailles shudder with horror. The communion of Christ, the Host, that eternal symbol of celestial love, served to seal letters; children spat out God's bread.

Happy they who escaped those times! Happy they who passed over the abyss gazing on Heaven! There were some of them, no doubt, and they will pity us.

It is unfortunately true that there is in blasphemy a great loss of force which comforts the heart that is too full. When an atheist, taking out his watch, gave a quarter of an hour to God to thunder against Him, it is certain that it was a quarter of an hour's wrath and atrocious enjoyment that he took to himself. It was the paroxysm of despair, a nameless appeal to all the celestial powers; it was a poor and miserable creature turning on the foot that is crushing him; it was a loud cry of pain. And who knows? in the eyes of Him who sees everything it was perhaps a prayer.

Thus young men found a use for inactive force in a liking for despair. Mocking glory, religion, love, everything in the world, is a great consolation to those who know not what to do ; in that they ridicule themselves and justify themselves while repeating the lesson. And then it is sweet to believe one's self unhappy, when one is only exhausted and tired. Debauchery, besides, the first conclusion from the principles of death, is a terrible millstone when it is a question of becoming enervated.

So the rich said to themselves : "There is nothing true but riches, all the rest is a dream ; let us enjoy and die." Those of moderate fortune said : "There is nothing true but forgetfulness, all the rest is a dream ; let us forget and die." And the poor said : "There is nothing true but misfortune, all the rest is a dream ; let us blaspheme and die."

Is this too black ? is it exaggerated ? What do you think of it ? Am I a misanthrope ? Let me make a reflection.

In reading the history of the fall of the Roman Empire, it is impossible not to take notice of the evil that the Christians, so admirable in the desert, did to the State as soon as they had the power. "When," says Montesquieu, "I think of the profound ignorance into which the Greek clergy plunged the laity, I cannot help comparing them to those Scythians of whom Herodotus speaks, who put out the eyes of their slaves, so that nothing could distract them and keep them from their

work. No affair of State, no peace, no war, no truce, no negotiation, no marriage, was attended to except by the ministry of the monks. One would not believe what evil resulted therefrom.”

Montesquieu might have added: Christianity destroyed the emperors, but it saved the peoples. It opened to the barbarians the palaces of Constantinople, but it opened the cabin doors to the consoling angels of Christ. It was a question, indeed, of the great ones of the earth! and how interesting the final death-rattles of an empire corrupted even to the very marrow of its bones, the sombre galvanism by means of which tyranny's skeleton was still agitating over the tomb of Heliogabalus and of Caracalla! What a fine thing to preserve was the mummy of Rome embalmed with the perfumes of Nero, swathed with the shroud of Tiberius! It was a question, ye men of politics, of going in search of the poor and of telling them to be at ease; it was a question of letting worms and moles gnaw the monuments of shame, but yet of taking from the flanks of the mummy a virgin as beautiful as the Mother of the Redeemer,—Hope, the friend of the oppressed.

That is what Christianity did; and now, for so many years past, what have those done who have destroyed it? They have seen that the poor have consented to be oppressed by the rich, the weak by the strong, for this reason that they said to themselves: “The rich and the strong will oppress me on earth; but when they

wish to enter into Paradise, I will be at the gate and I will accuse them before God's tribunal." Thus, alas! they kept their patience.

Christ's antagonists, then, have said to the poor: "You practise patience until the day of justice: there is no justice; you await eternal life in order to claim vengeance there: there is no eternal life; you amass your tears and those of your family, the cries of your children and the sobs of your wife so as to carry them to God's feet in the hour of death: there is no God."

Then it is certain that the poor dried their tears, that they told their wives to be silent, their children to come with them, and that they arrayed themselves on the glebe with the strength of a bull. They said to the rich: "You who oppress us are only a man;" and to the priest: "You who have consoled us have lied about it." That was exactly what Christ's antagonists wanted. Perhaps they believed they were thus bringing happiness to men, by sending the poor to the conquest of liberty.

But if the poor, having clearly understood for once that the priests are deceiving them, that the rich are robbing them, that all men have the same rights, that all kinds of property are of this world, and that its wretchedness is impious; if the poor man, believing in himself and his two arms as his entire creed, one fine day said to himself: "War on the rich! mine also be enjoyment here below, since there is none elsewhere!

mine be the earth, since heaven is void ! mine and everybody's, since all are equal ! ” O sublime reasoners who have led him to that, what will you say to him if he be vanquished ?

No doubt you are philanthropists, no doubt you are right as to the future, and the day will come when you will be blessed ; but not yet, in truth, can we bless you. When of old the oppressor said : “ Mine is the earth ! ” “ Mine is heaven ! ” the oppressed answered. What answer will he give now ?

The entire malady of the present age comes from two causes : the nation that has passed through '93 and through 1814 carries two wounds in its heart. All that was is no more ; all that will be is not yet. Look not elsewhere for the secret of our evils.

Take a man whose house is falling to ruin ; he has demolished it to build a new one. The rubbish lies on his field, and he awaits new stones for his new edifice. At the moment when you see him ready to trim his rough stones and to make his mortar, pick in hand, sleeves rolled back, they come to tell him that the stones are lacking, and to advise him to clean the old ones so as to make use of them. What would you have him do, him who does not want ruins to make a nest for his brood ? The quarry, however, is deep, the implements too weak to take the stones out of it. “ Wait,” they tell him, “ they will be taken out by degrees ; hope, work, advance, recede.” What is he not told ! And

during that time, that man, no longer having his old house and not yet his new house, knows not how to protect himself against the rains nor how to prepare his evening repast, nor where to work, nor where to rest, nor where to live, nor where to die; and his children are new-born.

Either I am strangely deceived, or we resemble that man. O peoples of the future ages! when, on a warm summer's day, you will be bent over your ploughs in the green fields of the fatherland; when, under a pure and spotless sun, you will see the earth, your fruitful mother, smile in her morning gown at the workman, her well-beloved child; when, wiping from your tranquil brows the holy baptism of perspiration, you will direct your gaze on your immense horizon, where there will be no stalk higher than another in the human harvest, but only bluebottles and daisies amid the ripening wheat; O free men! when then you will thank God for having been born for this harvest, think of us who will have passed, say that we have bought very dearly the rest that you will enjoy; pity us more than all your fathers; for we have many evils that made them worthy of compassion, and we have lost that which consoled them.

III

I have to relate on what occasion I was first seized with the malady of the times.

I was at table, at a great supper, after a masquerade. Around me, my friends in rich costumes; on all sides, young men and women, all sparkling with beauty and joy; to right and to left, rich viands, flasks, lustres, flowers; over my head, a clamorous orchestra, and in front of me, my mistress, a superb creature whom I idolized.

I was then nineteen; I had experienced no misfortune or malady; I was of a character at the same time haughty and candid, with every hope and an overflowing heart. The vapors of wine were fermenting in my veins; it was one of those moments of intoxication when all that one sees, all that one hears, speaks to one of the well-beloved. All nature then seemed as a precious stone of a thousand facets, on which the mysterious name is engraved. One would willingly embrace all those whom one sees smile, and one feels one's self the brother of all that exists. My mistress had made an appointment with me for the night, and I was slowly carrying my glass to my lips while looking at her.

As I was turning round to get a plate, my fork fell. I stooped to pick it up, and not finding it at first, I

raised the table-cloth to see where it had rolled. Under the table I then perceived my mistress's foot, placed on that of a young man seated at her side; their legs were crossed and interlaced, and they pressed them gently from time to time.

I raised myself, perfectly calm, asked for another fork, and continued the supper. My mistress and her neighbor were, on their part, very quiet also, hardly speaking and not looking at each other. The young man had his elbows on the table, and was indulging in pleasantries with another woman, who was showing him her collar and her bracelets. My mistress was unmoved, her eyes fixed and steeped in languor. I kept looking at both of them as long as the repast lasted, and I saw neither in their gestures nor on their countenances anything that could betray them. At the end, when we were at dessert, I made my napkin glide to the floor, and, having stooped anew, I found them again in the same position, closely linked to each other.

I had promised my mistress to escort her home that evening. She was a widow, and consequently quite free, because of an old relative who accompanied her and served her as chaperon. As I was crossing the peristyle, she called me. "Come, Octave," she said to me, "let us go, here I am." I began to laugh, and left without answering. After going a few steps, I sat down on a ledge. I know not of what I was thinking; I was as if besotted and become an idiot by reason of

the infidelity of that woman of whom I had never been jealous and about whom I had never entertained a suspicion. What I had just seen left no doubt in me, I remained as if stunned by a blow from a club, and recall nothing of what took place in me during the time that I remained on that ledge, except that, looking mechanically at the sky and seeing a star shoot, I saluted that fugitive glimmer, in which poets see a world destroyed, and gravely took off my hat to it.

I returned home quite tranquilly, experiencing nothing, feeling nothing, and as if deprived of reflection. I began to undress, and went to bed ; but scarcely had I laid my head on the pillow, when the spirit of vengeance seized me with such force that I fixed myself suddenly against the wall, as if all the muscles of my body had become wood. I got out of my bed crying, my arms extended, able to walk only on my heels, so cramped were the nerves of my toes. Thus I passed nearly an hour, completely mad, and as stiff as a skeleton. It was the first attack of wrath that I experienced.

The man whom I had taken by surprise with my mistress was one of my most intimate friends. I went to his house next day, accompanied by a young lawyer named Desgenais ; we took pistols, another witness, and went to the Bois de Vincennes. During the entire journey I avoided speaking to my adversary or even approaching him ; I thus resisted the desire that I had to strike him or insult him, violence of such sort being

always hideous or useless, from the moment that the law tolerates the combat in regular form. But I could not help keeping my eyes fixed on him. He was one of my childhood's comrades, and there had been between us a perpetual exchange of services for many years past. He was perfectly well aware of my love for my mistress, and had even on several occasions given me clearly to understand that bonds of this sort were sacred to a friend, and that he would be incapable of seeking to supplant me, even should he love the same woman as I did. In fine, I had the fullest confidence in him, and I had never perhaps pressed the hand of a human creature more cordially than his.

I looked curiously, eagerly, at that man whom I had heard speak of friendship like a hero of antiquity, and whom I had just seen caressing my mistress. It was the first time in my life that I saw a monster; I measured him with a haggard eye to observe how he was made. Him whom I had known at the age of ten, with whom I had lived day by day in most perfect and closest friendship, it seemed to me that I had never seen him. Here I will make use of a comparison.

There is a Spanish play, known to everybody, in which a stone statue comes to sup with a debauchee, sent by celestial justice. The debauchee affects good behavior and strives to seem indifferent; but the statue demands his hand, and, as soon as he has given it, the man feels seized with a mortal chill and falls in convulsions.

Now, every time that, during my life, it has happened to me to have believed confidently for a long time, either in a friend or in a mistress, and to discover all of a sudden that I was deceived, I have been able to describe the effect that this discovery produced on me only by comparing it with the handshaking of the statue. It is verily the impression of marble, as if the reality, in all its mortal coldness, froze me with a kiss ; it is the touch of the man of stone. Alas ! the terrible guest has knocked more than once at my door ; more than once have we supped together.

Yet, the arrangements made, my adversary and myself put ourselves in line, advancing slowly toward each other. He fired first and wounded me in the right arm. I at once took my pistol in my other hand ; but I could not raise it, strength failing me, and I fell on one knee.

Then I saw my enemy advancing precipitately, with a disturbed air and a very pale countenance. My seconds ran at the same time, seeing that I was wounded ; but he brushed them aside and took the hand of my maimed arm. He had his teeth clenched and could not speak ; I saw his anguish. He was suffering from the most frightful evil that man can feel. "Go away !" I called to him, "and dry yourself on the skirts of —— !" He was suffocating, and so was I.

They put me in a hackney coach, where I found a physician. The wound was discovered not to be dangerous, as the ball had not touched the bone ; but I was

in such a state of excitement that it was impossible to soothe me on the spot. Just as the hack was starting, I saw a trembling hand at the door: it was my adversary again returning. I shook my head as my only response; I was in such a rage that in vain would I have made an effort to pardon him, though I felt satisfied that his repentance was sincere.

Having arrived home, the blood that was flowing from my arm soothed me considerably; for weakness delivered me of my wrath, which did me more harm than my wound. I lay down with delight, and I believe that I have never drunk anything more enjoyable than the first glass of water that they gave me.

Having taken to my bed, fever seized me. It was then that I began to shed tears. What I could not conceive was not that my mistress had ceased to love me, but it was that she had deceived me. I did not understand by what reason a woman, who is compelled neither by duty nor by interest, could lie to one man when she is loving another. Twenty times a day did I ask Desgenais how that was possible. "If I were her husband," I said, "or if I were paying her, I could conceive that she would deceive me; but why, if she no longer loved me, not tell me so? why deceive me?" I did not conceive that one could lie in love; I was a child then, and I confess that I do not understand it yet. Every time that I have fallen in love with a woman I have told her so, and every time that I have

ceased to love a woman I have told her so likewise, with the same sincerity, having always thought that, in matters of this sort, we can do nothing by our will, and that there is no crime except in lying.

To everything that I said, Desgenais replied : "She is a wretch ; promise me that you will not see her again." I swore it to him solemnly. He advised me, besides, not to write to her, even to reproach her, and, if she wrote to me, not to answer. I promised him all that, almost astonished that he asked me, and indignant that he could suppose the contrary.

Yet the first thing that I did, as soon as I was able to get up and leave my room, was to rush to my mistress. I found her alone, seated on a chair in a corner of her room, with downcast countenance and in the greatest disorder. I overwhelmed her with the most violent reproaches ; I was intoxicated with despair. I cried loud enough to make the whole house resound, and at the same time my tears so violently interrupted my words that I fell on the bed to give them free vent. "Ah ! faithless one ! ah ! wretch !" I said to her, weeping, "you know that I shall die of it, does that give you pleasure ? what have I done to you ?"

She threw herself on my neck, told me that she had been enticed, led away ; that my rival had intoxicated her at that fatal supper, but that she had never been his ; that she had given herself up in a moment of forgetfulness ; that she had committed a fault, but not a crime ;

in short, that she saw clearly all the evil that she had done to me ; but that, if I did not pardon her, she also would die of it. All the tears that sincere repentance has, all the eloquence possessed by grief, she exhausted to console me ; pale and distracted, her dress open, her hair flowing over her shoulders, on her knees in the middle of the room, never had I seen her so beautiful, and I shuddered with horror whilst all my feelings were aroused at that spectacle.

I left there broken, no longer able to see and hardly able to hold myself up. I wanted never to see her again ; but, after a quarter of an hour I returned. I know not what desperate strength drove me thither ; I had, as it were, a dull desire to possess her once more, to drink from her magnificent body all those bitter tears, and to kill both of us after. In fine, I abhorred her and I idolized her ; I felt that her love was my destruction, but that to live without her was impossible. I went up to her apartments like a flash of lightning ; I did not speak to any domestic, I entered direct, knowing the house, and I pushed open the door of her room.

I found her seated before her toilet, motionless and covered with precious stones. Her chambermaid was dressing her hair ; she held in her hand a piece of red crape which she was passing lightly over her cheeks. I thought I was in a dream ; it seemed to me impossible that there was that same woman whom I had just seen, a quarter of an hour ago, bathed in grief and stretched

on the floor ; I remained like a statue. She, hearing her door open, turned her head, smiling : " Is it you ? " she said. She was going to the ball, and was awaiting my rival, who was to escort her thither. She recognized me, pressed her lips together, and knit her brow.

I took a step as if to leave. I looked at the nape of her slender neck, sleek and perfumed, where her hair was knotted, and on which sparkled a diamond comb ; that nape, the seat of the vital force, was blacker than hell ; two shining tresses were knotted there, and slight stalks of silver were balanced above. Her shoulders and her neck, whiter than milk, relieved the erect and luxuriant down. There was in that uplifted hair a something indescribably beautiful, yet immodest, that seemed to taunt me with the disorder in which I had seen her an instant before. I advanced all of a sudden and struck that nape with the back of my clenched hand. My mistress did not utter a cry : she fell on her hands, after which I left precipitately.

Having returned home, the fever again seized me with such violence that I was obliged to go back to bed. My wound was opened afresh, and I suffered much from it. Desgenais came to see me ; I related to him all that had happened. He listened to me in deep silence, then walked for some time through the room like a man without resolve. At last he stopped in front of me and burst into a fit of laughter : " Is she your first mistress ? " he said to me. " No," I said to him, " she is the last."

Toward the middle of the night, as I was sleeping a restless sleep, I seemed in a dream to hear a deep sigh. I opened my eyes and saw my mistress standing near my bed, her arms crossed, like a spectre. I was unable to restrain a cry of terror, believing in an apparition emanating from my sick brain. I threw myself out of bed and fled to the other end of the room; but she came to me: "It is I," she said; and, seizing me round the waist, she drew me to her. "What do you want of me?" I exclaimed; "release me! I am capable of killing you on the spot!"

"Well, kill me!" she said. "I have betrayed you, I have lied to you, I am a wretch and miserable; but I love you, and I cannot do without you."

I looked at her; how beautiful she was! Her whole body shook; her eyes, lost in love, shed torrents of lust; her throat was bare, her lips were burning. I took her up in my arms. "Be it so," I said to her, "but before God who sees us, by my father's soul, I swear to you that I will kill you on the spot and myself also." I took up a table-knife that was on my mantel-piece and put it under the pillow.

"Come, Octave," she said to me smiling and embracing me, "do nothing foolish. Come, my boy; all these horrors make you sick; you are feverish. Give me that knife."

I saw that she wanted to take it. "Listen to me," I then said to her; "I know not who you are and what

comedy you are playing ; but, as for me, I do not play it. I have loved you as much as a man can love on earth, and, to my misfortune and my death, know that I still love you to distraction. You come to tell me that you love me also ; I am gratified ; but, by all that is sacred in the world, if I am your lover to-night, another will not be so to-morrow. Before God, before God," I repeated, "I will not take you back as mistress, for I hate you as much as I love you. Before God, if you want me, I will kill you to-morrow morning." By speaking thus I threw myself into a complete delirium. She cast her cloak around her shoulders and, running away, left me.

When Desgenais knew this history, he said to me : "Why did you not want her? you are very fastidious ; she is a pretty woman."

"Are you joking?" I said to him. "Do you think that such a woman could be my mistress? do you think that I would ever consent to share with another man? do you consider that she herself acknowledges that another possesses her, and would you have me forget that I love her, in order to possess her also? If such are your loves, you excite my pity."

Desgenais replied that he loved only the girls, and that he did not examine so closely. "My dear Octave," he added, "you are very young ; you would like to have quite a number of things, fine things too, but such as do not exist. You believe in a singular sort of

love; perhaps you are capable of it; I believe so, but do not wish it for you. You will have other mistresses, my friend, and you will regret some future day what happened to you this night. When this woman came to see you, it is certain that she loved you; she does not love you perhaps at the present moment, she is perhaps in another's arms; but she loved you that night in this room; and of what importance is the rest to you? You had a fine night there, and you will regret it, be sure of that, for she will not come back again. A woman pardons everything, except that one does not want her. It must have been that her love for you was terrible, for her to come to see you, knowing and avowing herself guilty, perhaps suspecting that she would be refused. Believe me, you will regret such a night, for I tell you that you will hardly have another such."

There was in all that Desgenais said, an air of conviction so simple and so profound, so despairing a tranquillity of experience, that I shuddered as I listened to him. Whilst he was speaking, I felt a violent temptation to go again to my mistress's, or to write to her to get her to come. I was unable to rise; that saved me from the shame of exposing myself anew to finding her either waiting for my rival or closeted with him. But I still had the means of writing to her; I asked myself in spite of myself, in case I should write to her, whether she would come.

When Desgenais had left, I felt so terrible an agitation that I resolved to put an end to it, in some way or other. After a terrible struggle, horror at last overcame love. I wrote to my mistress that I would never see her again, and that I entreated her not to come back any more, if she did not want to expose herself to being refused at my door. I rang violently, I ordered that my letter be taken in the greatest possible haste. Scarcely had my domestic shut the door when I called him back. He did not hear me; I dared not call him back a second time; and, putting both my hands over my face, I remained buried in the deepest despair.

IV

Next day, at sunrise, the first thought that came to me was to ask myself: "What shall I do now?"

I had no calling, no occupation. I had studied medicine and law, without being able to decide on adopting either of these careers; I had worked six months at a banker's with such indifferent results that I had been obliged to hand in my resignation so as not to be dismissed. I had made good, but superficial studies, having a memory that needs exercise, and that forgets as easily as it learns.

My only treasure, after love, was independence. Since my adolescence I had devoted it to a fierce worship, and I had, so to speak, consecrated it in my heart. It was on a certain day that my father, thinking already of my future, had spoken to me of several careers, one of which he desired me to choose. I was resting on my elbow at my window, and I was looking at a slender and solitary poplar that was swaying to and fro in the garden. I was reflecting on all these different callings, and was deliberating about taking up one of them. I puzzled my brains in considering them one by one; after which, feeling no taste for either, I allowed my thoughts to wander. It seemed to me all of a sudden that I felt the earth move, and that the silent and invisible force that draws it through space was making itself felt to my senses; I saw it mount into the heavens; it seemed to me that I was, as it were, on a ship; the poplar that I had before my eyes appeared to me like a mast of a vessel; I arose, extending my arms and exclaimed: "It is indeed a small matter to be a passenger of a day on this ship floating in the ether; it is quite a small matter to be a man, a black spot on this ship; I will be a man, but not a particular kind of man!"

Such was the first vow that, at the age of fourteen, I had pronounced in the face of nature, and since that time I had tried nothing but in obedience to my father, yet without ever being able to overcome my repugnance.

I was free, then, not from sloth, but from will, loving, moreover, all that God has made and very little of what has been made by man. I had known of life only love, of the world only my mistress, and did not want to know anything more of them. And so, having fallen in love on leaving college, I had sincerely believed that it was for my whole life, and every other thought had disappeared.

My existence was sedentary. I passed the day with my mistress ; my great pleasure was to escort her to the country during the fine days of summer and to lie down near her in the woods, on the grass or on the moss, the spectacle of nature in its splendor having always been to me the most powerful of aphrodisiacs. In winter, as she loved the world, we hunted up balls and masks, so that this leisurely life never ceased ; and as I had thought only of her so long as she had been faithful to me, I found myself without a thought when she had betrayed me.

To give an idea of the condition in which my mind then was, I cannot better compare it than to one of those apartments such as we see to-day, in which are found, gathered and confused, articles of furniture of all times and of all countries. Our age has no forms. We have not impressed the seal of our time either on our houses, or on our gardens, or on anything whatever. We meet in the street people who have the beard cut as in the time of Henri III., others who are shaven, others

who have the hair arranged like that of the portrait of Raphael, others as of the time of Jesus Christ. And so the apartments of the rich are cabinets of curiosities: the antique, the Gothic, the taste of the Renaissance, that of Louis XIII., everything is pellmell. In fine, we have of all the ages, except our own, a thing that has never been seen in any other period. Eclecticism is our taste; we take all that we find,—this for its beauty, that for its suitableness, such another thing for its antiquity, such another for its very ugliness; so that we live only in wreckage, as if the end of the world were at hand.

Such was my mind; I had read a great deal; besides, I had learned to paint. I knew by heart a great number of things, but nothing in order, so that I had my head at the same time empty and swollen, like a sponge. I became a lover of all the poets one after the other; but, being of a very impressionable nature, the last comer had always the gift of disgusting me with the rest. I had made of myself a great storehouse of ruins, until at last, being no longer thirsty by force of drinking the novel and the unknown, I found myself a ruin.

Yet on this ruin there was something good still young: it was the hope of my heart, which was only that of a child.

This hope, which nothing had tarnished or corrupted, and which love had exalted to excess, had suddenly received a mortal wound. My mistress's

perfidy had stricken it at the height of its flight, and, when I thought of it, I felt in my soul something that faltered convulsively, like a wounded bird that is in agony.

Society, which does so much evil, resembles that serpent of the Indies whose home is the leaf of a plant which heals its bite; it almost always presents the remedy with the suffering that it has caused. A man, for example, who has his existence regulated, business at rising, visits at such an hour, work at such another, lover at such another, may without danger lose his mistress. His occupations and his thoughts are like those impassive soldiers ranged in battle on one and the same line: a shot carries off one, the neighbors close up, and he appears no more.

I had not that resource from the time that I was alone: nature, my beloved mother, seemed to me on the contrary more vast and more void than ever. If I had been able entirely to forget my mistress, I should have been saved. How many people who do not need so much to heal them! They are incapable of loving a faithless woman, and their conduct, in such a case, is admirable for its firmness. But is it thus that one loves at nineteen, at the time when, not knowing anything in the world, desiring everything, the young man feels at one and the same time the germ of all the passions? Of what does this age doubt? To right, to left, down there, on the horizon, everywhere, some voice calls

him. All is desire, all is reverie. There is no reality that holds when the heart is young; there is no oak so knotty and so hard from which a dryad does not emerge; and, if one had a hundred arms, one would not fear to open them in the void; one has only to clasp his mistress there, and the void is filled.

As for me, I did not imagine that one did else than love; and, when one spoke to me of another occupation, I made no answer. My passion for my mistress had been, as it were, savage, and my whole life felt from it indescribably monkish and fierce. I want to cite only one example. She had given me her portrait in miniature on a medallion; I wore it on my heart, a thing done by many men; but having one day found at a curiosity dealer's an iron discipline, at the end of which was a plate bristling with points, I had had the medallion attached to the plate and wore it thus. Those nails, which entered my breast at each movement, caused me so strange a pleasure that I sometimes raised my hand to feel them more keenly. I know well that it is folly; love commits many others.

Since that woman had betrayed me, I had removed the cruel medallion. I cannot say how sadly I detached the iron girdle from it, and what a sigh my heart heaved when it found itself delivered from it! "Ah! poor scars," I said to myself, "you are, then, going to be effaced? Ah! my wound, my dear wound, what balm am I going to lay on you?"

It was all very fine for me to hate that woman: she was, so to say, in the blood of my veins; I cursed her, but I dreamt of her. What was I to do with that? what was I to do with a dream? what reason to give for memories of flesh and blood? Lady Macbeth, having slain Duncan, says that the Ocean would not wash her hands; it would not have washed my scars. I said to Desgenais: "What would you? when I fall asleep, her head is there on the pillow."

I had lived only in that woman; to doubt her was to doubt everything; to curse her, to deny everything; to lose her, to destroy everything. I did not go out any more; the world appeared to me as a people of monsters, of wild beasts and of crocodiles. To everything that people said to me to distract me I replied: "Yes, it is well said, and rest assured that I will do nothing about it."

I betook myself to the window and I said to myself: "She will come, I am sure of it; she is coming, she is turning around the corner; I feel her approaching. She cannot live without me, any more than I without her. What shall I say to her? what face shall I put on?" Thereupon her perfidies come back to me: "Ah! may she not come!" I exclaim to myself; "let her not approach! I am capable of killing her!"

Since my last letter I had not heard her spoken of. "At last, what is she doing?" I said to myself. "She loves another? Let us also love another. Love

whom?" And, while seeking, I heard, as it were, a voice in the distance crying out: "You, another besides me! Two beings who love each other, who embrace each other, and who are not you and I! Is it possible? Are you mad?"

"Dastard!" Desgenais said to me, "when will you forget that woman? Is she, then, such a great loss? the fine pleasure of being loved by her! Take the first that comes."

"No," I replied, "it is not so great a loss. Have I not done what I ought? have I not driven her from here? What, then, have you to say? The rest concerns me; bulls wounded in the circus are free to go and lie down in a corner with the matador's sword in their shoulders and to die in peace. What shall I do, tell me at once? Who are your first comers? You will show me a clear sky, trees and houses, men who speak, drink, sing, women who dance and horses that gallop. All that is not life, it is the bustle of life. Come, come, give me rest."

V

When Desgenais saw that my despair was beyond remedy, that I did not want to listen to any one nor to leave my room, he took the matter seriously. I saw him arrive one evening with an air of gravity; he

spoke to me of my mistress and continued in a tone of banter, saying of women all the evil that he thought. While he was speaking I had been resting on my elbow, and, raising myself on my bed, I listened to him attentively.

It was on one of those sombre evenings when the whistling wind resembles the moans of one dying; a cutting rain was beating against the glass, leaving at intervals a deadly silence. All nature suffers at these times; the trees are agitated with grief or sadly bow the head; the field birds shut themselves up in the thickets; the streets of the cities are empty. My wound was making me suffer. Yet on the evening before, I had a mistress and a friend; my mistress had betrayed me, my friend had stretched me on a bed of pain. I did not yet clearly unravel what was passing through my head; it seemed to me sometimes that I had had a dream full of horror, and that I had only to close my eyes to wake up again happy next day; sometimes it was my whole life that seemed to me a ridiculous and puerile dream, the falseness of which had just been unveiled. Desgenais was seated in front of me, near the lamp; he was firm and serious, with a perpetual smile. He was a man full of heart, but dry as pumice-stone. A precocious experience had made him bald before aging; he knew life, and had wept in his time; but his grief wore a cuirass; he was a materialist, and waited for death.

“Octave,” he said to me, “according to what is passing in you, I see that you believe in love such as romancers and poets represent it; you believe, in a word, in what is said here below, and not in what is done in it. That comes from the fact that you do not reason soundly and it may lead you to very great misfortunes.

“Poets represent love as sculptors picture to us beauty, as musicians create melody; that is to say, endowed with a nervous and exquisite organization, they collect with discernment and ardor the purest elements of life, the most beautiful lines of matter, and the most harmonious voices of nature. There was at Athens, it is said, a great number of pretty girls; Praxiteles sketched them all one after the other; after which, of all these diverse beauties, each of which had her defect, he made a single beauty without defect, and created Venus. The first man who made a musical instrument, and who gave to the art of music its rules and its laws, had, long before, listened to the murmuring of reeds and the singing of linnets. Thus the poets, who knew life, after having seen many more or less passing loves, after having felt profoundly to what a sublime degree of exaltation passion can at moments rise, cutting off from human nature all the elements that degrade it, created those mysterious names that have passed from age to age on men’s lips: Daphnis and Chloë, Hero and Leander, Pyramus and Thisbe.

“To want to look in real life for loves like to those, eternal and absolute, is the same thing as to seek on the public highway for women as beautiful as Venus, or to wish for nightingales singing the symphonies of Beethoven.

“Perfection does not exist ; to comprehend it is the triumph of the human intellect ; to desire it in order to possess it is the most dangerous of human follies. Open your window, Octave ; do you not see the infinite ? do you not feel that the heavens are unbounded ? does not your reason tell you so ? and yet do you conceive the infinite ? do you form any idea of a thing without end, you who were born yesterday and who will die to-morrow ? In all the countries of the world that spectacle of immensity has been the cause of the greatest acts of madness. Religions come from that ; it was to possess the infinite that Cato cut his throat, that the Christians gave themselves up to the lions, the Huguenots to the Catholics ; all peoples of the earth have stretched out their arms towards that immense space and have wished to precipitate themselves into it. The madman wants to possess Heaven ; the wise man admires it, kneels, and does not desire.

“Perfection, friend, is no more made for us than immensity. It must not be sought in anything, nor demanded of anything, neither of love, beauty, nor of happiness, nor of virtue ; but one must love it to be as virtuous, beautiful, and happy as man can be.

“Let us suppose that you have in your study a painting by Raphael that you regarded as perfect; let us suppose that yesterday evening, while inspecting it closely, you discovered in one of the personages of that painting a gross fault in design, a broken member or an unnatural muscle, like one, it is said, that is to be found in one of the arms of the ancient gladiator; you will certainly feel great displeasure, yet you will not throw your painting into the fire; you will only say that it is not perfect, but that there are points which are worthy of admiration.

“There are women whose natural good qualities and sincerity of heart prevent them from having two lovers at the same time. You believed that your mistress was such; that would have been better, indeed. You have discovered that she was deceiving you; that drives you to despise her, to maltreat her, to believe, in fine, that she is worthy of your hate.

“Even though your mistress had never deceived you, and though she love no one but you at present, reflect, Octave, how far from perfection her love would still be, how human it would be, small, confined to the laws of the world’s hypocrisy; reflect that another man had her before you, and even more than one other man; that still others will have her after you.

“Make this reflection: what is driving you to despair at this moment is that idea of perfection which you had formed for yourself regarding your mistress and from

which you see that she has fallen. But as soon as you shall have clearly understood that this first idea itself was human, small, and restricted, you will see what a little matter is a degree more or less on that great rotten ladder of human imperfection.

“You will willingly agree, will you not? that your mistress has had other men and that she will have others; you will tell me, no doubt, that it is of little importance to know it, provided she loves you and has only you as long as she will love you. But as for me, I say to you: Since she has had other men than you, what matters it whether it be yesterday or two years ago? Since she will have other men, what matters it whether it be to-morrow or two years hence? Since she is to love you only once, and since she loves you, what matters it, then, whether it be for two years or for but a single night? Are you a man, Octave? Do you see the leaves falling from the trees, the sun rising and setting? Do you hear the clock of life vibrating at each beat of your heart? Is there, then, such a great difference to us between a love of a year and a love of an hour, you madman who, through that window large as the hand, can see the infinite?

“You call the woman honest who loves you faithfully for two years; apparently you have an almanac made expressly for finding out how long it takes for men’s kisses to dry on women’s lips. You make a great difference between the woman who gives herself

for money and her who gives herself for pleasure, between her who gives herself for pride and her who gives herself for devotedness. Among the women whom you buy you pay some more than you do others; among those whom you seek out for the pleasure of the senses, you abandon yourself to some more confidently than you do to others; among those whom you have from vanity, you show yourself prouder of this one than of that one; and of those to whom you are devoted, there are some to whom you will give the third of your heart, to another the fourth part, to another half, according to her education, manners, name, birth, beauty, temperament, occasion, according to what people say of her, according to what time it is, according to what you have drunk at dinner.

“You have women, Octave, for the reason that you are young, ardent, that your visage is oval and regular, that your hair is carefully combed; but, for this very reason, my friend, you do not know what a woman is.

“Nature, above all, wills the reproduction of beings; everywhere, from the mountain’s top to the ocean’s bed, life is afraid to die. God, to preserve His work, has, then, established this law, that the greatest enjoyment of all living beings should be the act of generation. The palm-tree, sending to its female its fecund dust, shudders with love in the glowing winds; the rutting stag forces its resisting hind; the dove palpitates under the wings of the male like a sensitive lover;

and man, holding his companion in his arms, in the bosom of omnipotent nature, feels bounding in his heart the divine spark that created him.

“Oh, my friend! when you clasp in your naked arms a beautiful and robust woman, if lust draws tears from you, if you feel oaths of eternal love sobbing on your lips, if the infinite descends into your heart, do not fear to surrender yourself, even should you be with a courtesan.

“But do not confound the wine with the intoxication; do not believe the cup divine from which you drink the divine potion; do not be astonished in the evening to find it empty and broken. It is a woman, it is a fragile vessel, made of earth by a potter.

“Thank God for pointing out Heaven to you, and because you flap the wing do not believe yourself a bird. Birds themselves cannot cross the clouds; there is a sphere in which air is wanting to them; and the lark, which rises singing in the morning mists, sometimes falls dead on the furrow.

“Take of love what a temperate man takes of wine; do not become a drunkard. If your mistress is sincere and faithful, love her for that; but if she is not so, and she be young and beautiful, love her because she is young and beautiful; and, if she is agreeable and witty, still love her; and, if she is nothing of all that, but she loves you only, love her still. One is not loved every evening.

“Do not tear out your hair and do not speak of stabbing yourself because you have a rival. You say that your mistress is deceiving you for another ; it is your pride that suffers from it : but change only the words ; say to yourself that it is he whom she is deceiving for you, and how glorious you are.

“Make no rule of conduct for yourself, and do not say that you wish to be loved to the exclusion of every one else ; for, in saying that, as you are a man and inconstant yourself, you are forced to add tacitly : ‘As much as that is *possible*.’

“Take time as it comes, the wind as it blows, woman as she is. Spanish women, the first among women, love faithfully ; their hearts are sincere and violent, but they carry a stiletto on their hearts. Italian women are lascivious, but they seek broad shoulders and take their lovers’ measure with tailors’ tapes. English women are exalted and melancholy, but they are cold and formal. German women are tender and sweet, but insipid and monotonous. French women are witty, elegant, and voluptuous, but they lie like demons.

“Above all, do not accuse women of being what they are ; it is we who have made them so, unmaking the work of nature on every occasion.

“Nature, which thinks of everything, has made the virgin to be a lover ; but at her first child, her hair falls, her bosom is deformed, her body bears a scar ; woman is made to be a mother. Man would perhaps

withdraw from her then, disgusted at beauty lost ; but his child clings to him weeping. That is the family, the human law ; all that deviates from it is monstrous. What constitutes the virtue of rural folks is that their wives are child-bearing and nursing machines, as they themselves are laboring machines. They have neither false hair nor virginal milk ; but their loves have no leprosy ; in their artless couplings they take no notice that America has been discovered. Lacking sensuality, their wives are sound ; their hands are callous, but their hearts are not so.

“ Civilization acts contrary to nature. In our cities and in accordance with our manners, the virgin, made to run in the sun, to admire nude wrestlers, as at Lacedæmon, to choose, to love, she is shut up, she is locked up ; yet she hides a romance under her crucifix ; pale and idle, she is corrupted in front of her mirror, in the silence of night she tarnishes that beauty which is stifling her and which needs the open air. Then all of a sudden she is taken thence, knowing nothing, loving nothing, desiring everything ; an old woman indoctrinates her, an obscene word is whispered in her ear, and she is thrust into the bed of a stranger who violates her. That is marriage, that is to say, the civilized family. And now behold that poor girl making a child ; look at her hair, her bosom, her body becoming tarnished ; look at her having lost the beauty of lovers, and not having loved. Look at her having conceived, look at

her having given birth to a child, and asking why, and she is told : ' You are a mother.' She answers : ' I am not a mother ; let that child be given to a woman who has milk, there is none in my breasts, it is not thus that milk comes to women.' Her husband answers her that she is right, that his child would disgust him with her. One comes, one decks her, one puts Mechlin lace on her blood-stained bed ; she is cared for, she is healed of the sickness of maternity. A month later, see her at the Tuileries, at the ball, at the Opera : her child is at Chaillot, at Auxerre ; her husband in the place of ill repute. Ten young men speak to her of love, of devotedness, of sympathy, of eternal embrace, of all that she has in her heart. She takes one of them, draws him to her breast ; he dishonors her, returns, and goes to the Bourse. Now see her launch ; she weeps one night, and finds that the tears redden her eyes. She takes a consoler, for whose loss another consoles her ; thus until she is thirty and over. It is then that with senses blunted and gangrened, no longer having anything human, not even disgust, one evening she meets a handsome youth with black hair, with ardent eye, with a heart palpitating with hope ; she recalls her youth, she remembers what she suffered, and, giving him the lessons of her life, she teaches him never to love.

" That is woman such as we have made her ; there are our mistresses. But what ! they are women, and there are good moments with them !

“ If you are of firm temper, sure of yourself and truly a man, this, then, is what I advise you : rush fearlessly into the torrent of the world ; have courtesans, dancers, middle-class girls, and marchionesses. Be constant and faithless, sad and joyous, deceived or respected ; but know whether you are loved, for, from the moment that you will be so, what matters the rest to you ?

“ If you are a mediocre and ordinary man, I am of the opinion that you will seek some time before deciding, but that you did not count on anything of what you will have supposed you would find in your mistress.

“ If you are a weak man, inclined to let yourself be dominated, and to take root where you see a little earth, make for yourself a cuirass that resists everything : for, if you give way to your weakly nature, where you will have taken root you will not grow ; you will dry up like a sluggish plant, and you will bear neither flower nor fruit. The sap of your life will pass into a foreign bark ; all your actions will be pale as the willow leaf ; you will have to water you only your own tears, and to nourish you only your own heart.

“ But if you are of an exalted nature, believing in dreams and wishing to realize them, I answer you then quite plainly : ‘ Love does not exist.’

“ For I concur in your opinion, and I say to you : To love is to give body and soul, or, to express it better, it is to make a single being of two ; it is to walk in the sun, in the open, breezy air, amid wheat fields

and meadows, with a body of four arms, two heads, and two hearts. Love is the faith, the religion of terrestrial happiness; it is a luminous triangle placed in the dome of that temple which we call the world. To love is to walk freely in that temple, and to have at one's side a being capable of understanding why a thought, a word, a flower, makes you stop and raise your head towards the celestial triangle. To exercise man's noble faculties is a great good, and that is why genius is a fine thing; but to double one's faculties, to press a heart and an understanding on one's understanding and one's heart, is the supreme happiness. God has done no more for man: that is why love is worth more than genius. Now, tell me, is that our wives' love? No, no, it must be admitted. With them, to love is something else; it is to go out veiled, to write mysteriously, to walk tremblingly on tiptoe, to plot and banter, to cast languishing glances, to heave chaste sighs in a starched and stiffened dress, then to draw the bolts so as to throw it over her head, to humiliate a rival, to deceive a husband, to drive her lovers mad; with our wives, to love is to play at lying as children play hide-and-seek: a hideous debauch of the heart, worse than all the Roman lubricity at the Saturnalia of Priapus; a bastard parody of vice itself as well as of virtue; a dull and low comedy in which everything is whispered and is acted with oblique looks, in which everything is small, elegant, and misshapen, as in those porcelain monsters that are

brought from China ; a lamentable derision of what there is of beauty and ugliness, of divine and infernal in the world ; a shadow without a body, the skeleton of all that God has made."

Thus spoke Desgenais in a snappish tone, amid the silence of the night.

VI

I was next day in the Bois de Boulogne, before dinner ; the weather was dull. Arrived at the Porte Maillot, I let my horse go where he pleased, and giving myself up to a profound reverie, I gradually went over again in my head all that Desgenais had said to me.

As I crossed an alley, I heard myself called by name. I turned back, and saw in an open carriage one of my mistress's most intimate friends. She called out to stop, and, extending her hand with a friendly air, asked me, if I had nothing to do, to come and dine with her.

This woman, who was called Madame Levasseur, was small, stout, and very blonde ; she had always displeased me, I know not why, there never having been anything disagreeable in our relations. Yet I could not resist the desire to accept her invitation ; I pressed her hand while thanking her ; I felt that we were going to speak of my mistress.

She gave me some one to lead back my horse ; I got into her carriage, she was alone there, and we at once resumed the way to Paris. Rain was beginning to fall, they closed the carriage ; thus shut up in a tête-à-tête, we at first remained silent. I looked at her with inexpressible sadness ; not only was she my faithless one's friend, but she was her confidante. Often, during the happy days, she had been a third party in our evening meetings. With what impatience I had borne her then ! how often I had counted the moments that she spent with us ! Whence no doubt my aversion to her. It was all very fine for me to know that she approved of our love, that she even sometimes defended me to my mistress in days of storm ; I could not, for all her friendship, pardon her importunities. Despite her goodness and the services that she had rendered us, she seemed to me ugly, tiresome. Alas ! how beautiful I found her now ! I looked at her hands, her garments ; each movement went to my heart ; the whole past was written there. She saw me, she divined what I felt toward her, and that memories were oppressing me. The journey passed thus, I looking at her, she smiling at me. At last, when we entered Paris, she took my hand : "Well !" she said. "Well," I answered, sobbing, "tell her, madame, if you wish." And I shed a torrent of tears.

But when after dinner we were by the fireside : "But at last," she said, "is all that affair irrevocable ? is there no further means ?"

“Alas ! madame,” I replied, “there is nothing irrevocable but the sorrow that will kill me. My history is not a long one to tell : I can neither love her, nor love another, nor do without loving.”

She threw herself back on her chair at these words, and I saw on her countenance the marks of her compassion. Long did she seem to reflect and commune with herself, as if feeling an echo in her heart. Her eyes were veiled, and she remained shut up as in a memory. She extended her hand to me, I approached her. “And I also,” she murmured, “and I also ! that is what I have known under proper circumstances.” A keen emotion stopped her.

Of all the sisters of Love, one of the most beautiful is Pity. I held Madame Levasseur’s hand ; she was almost in my arms ; she began to tell me all that she could imagine in my mistress’s favor, to complain of me as much as to excuse her. My sadness increased thereat ; what answer should I make ? She passed from that to speak of herself.

Not long ago, she said to me, a man who loved her had abandoned her. She had made great sacrifices ; her fortune was compromised, as well as the honor of her name. On the part of her husband, whom she knew to be vindictive, there had been threats. It was a story mingled with tears, and which interested me so much that I forgot my own sorrows as I listened to hers. She had been married against her heart, she

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had struggled for a long time ; but she regretted nothing, except being no longer loved. I believe even that she accused herself to some extent, as not having known how to preserve her lover's heart, and having acted with levity in his regard.

When, after having comforted her heart, she became gradually as if mute and uncertain : " No, madame," I said to her, " it was not chance that brought me to-day to the Bois de Boulogne. Let me believe that human sorrows are straying sisters, but that a good angel is somewhere, which sometimes designedly unites these weak trembling hands extended toward God. Since I have seen you again and since you have called me, do not repent, then, of having spoken ; and, whoever it be who is listening to you, never repent of tears. The secret that you confide to me is only a tear fallen from your eyes, but it has remained on my heart. Permit me to return, and let us sometimes suffer together."

A sympathy so keen took possession of me as I spoke thus, that, without reflecting on it, I embraced her ; it did not occur to my mind that she might be offended thereat, and she did not even appear to notice it.

A deep silence reigned in the house in which Madame Levasseur dwelt. Some tenant being ill there, they had spread straw in the street, so that the carriages made no noise. I was near her, holding her in my arms, and abandoning myself to one of the sweetest emotions of the heart, the feeling of a sorrow shared.

Our conversation continued in a tone of the most expansive friendship. She told me her sufferings, I related mine to her ; and, between these two sorrows that were touching each other, I felt an indescribable sweetness arise, an indescribably consoling voice, like a pure and celestial accord born of the concert of two moaning voices. Yet, during all those tears, as I leaned towards Madame Levasseur, I saw only her countenance. In a moment of silence, having raised myself up and receded a little, I perceived that whilst we were speaking, she had rested her foot high enough on the chimney-piece for her leg, her dress having slipped, to be entirely exposed. To me it seemed singular that, seeing my confusion, she did not disturb herself, and I took a few steps while turning my head so as to give her time to adjust her skirts ; she did nothing of the kind. Returning to the fireplace, I remained there leaning silently, looking at that disorder, the appearance of which was too revolting to be borne. At last, meeting her eyes and seeing clearly that she herself very well perceived what was the matter, I felt as if thunderstruck ; for I distinctly understood that I was the plaything of an effrontery so monstrous, that grief itself was to her only a seduction of the senses. I took my hat without saying a word : she let down her dress slowly, and I left the room making her a low bow.

VII

On returning home, I found a large wooden box in the middle of my room. One of my aunts had died, and I had a share in her inheritance, which was not very large. This box contained, among other indifferent articles, a quantity of dusty old books. Knowing not what to do, and worn out with lassitude, I undertook to read some of them. For the most part they were romances of the age of Louis XV.; my aunt, a very devout woman, had probably inherited some of them herself, and had kept them without reading them; for they were, so to say, so many catechisms of libertinism.

I have in my mind a singular propensity to reflect on everything that happens to me, even to the slightest incidents, and to give them a sort of consequent and moral reason; I treat them, in a certain sense, as rosary beads, and I try, in spite of myself, to connect them by one and the same string.

Though I seem puerile in this respect, the arrival of these books struck me, in the circumstance in which I then found myself. I devoured them with unbounded bitterness and sadness, my heart broken, and the smile on my lips. "Yes, you are right," I said to them, "you alone know the secrets of life; you alone dare

to say that nothing is true but debauch, hypocrisy, and corruption. Be my friends, cast your corrosive poisons on my soul's wound; teach me to believe in you."

While I was thus burying myself in darkness, my favorite poets and my books of study remained scattered in the dust. I trampled them under foot in my attacks of wrath: "And you," I said to them, "mad dreamers who teach only how to suffer, miserable arrangers of words, charlatans if you knew the truth, but, if you were in good faith, liars in both cases, who tell fairy stories with the human heart, I will burn all of you even to the last!"

Amid all that, tears came to my aid, and I perceived that there was nothing true but my sorrow. "Well," I then exclaimed in my delirium, "tell me, good and bad genii, counselors of good and evil, tell me, then, what it is necessary to do! Choose, then, an arbiter between you."

I took up an old Bible that was on my table, and opened it at random: "Answer me, you, God's book," I said to it; "let us know a little of what your advice is." I fell on these words of *Ecclesiastes*, chapter ix.:

"For all this I considered in my heart, even to declare all this, that the righteous, and the wise, and their works, are in the hand of God: no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them.

"All things come alike to all: there is one event to the righteous, and to the wicked; to the good, and to

the clean, and to the unclean ; to him that sacrificeth, and to him that sacrificeth not : as is the good, so is the sinner ; and he that sweareth, as he that feareth an oath.

“ This is an evil among all things that are done under the sun, that there is one event unto all : yea, also the heart of the sons of men is full of evil, and madness is in their heart while they live, and after that, they go to the dead.”

I remained stupefied after having read these words ; I did not believe that such a sentiment existed in the Bible. “ So, then,” I said to it, “ and you also doubt, you, Book of Hope ! ”

What, then, do astronomers think, when they predict at a stated point, at the hour named, the passage of a comet, the most irregular of celestial strollers ? What, then, do naturalists think, when they show you, through a microscope, animals in a drop of water ? Do they believe, then, that they invent what they perceive, and that their microscopes and their spy-glasses make laws for nature ? What, then, did the First Lawgiver to men think, when, seeking what ought to be the first stone of the social edifice, no doubt irritated by some importunate talker, he struck on his brass tables, and felt the law of retaliation calling out in his entrails ? had he, then, invented justice ? And he who was the first to snatch from the earth the fruit planted by his neighbor, and who put it under his cloak, and who

fled as he looked here and there, had he invented shame? And he who, having found that same robber who had despoiled him of the product of his labor, pardoned him his first offence, and, instead of raising a hand against him, said to him: "Sit down there and take this also;" when, after having thus done good for evil, he raised his head towards heaven, and felt his heart bound, and his eyes moisten with tears, and his knees bend to the ground, had he then invented virtue? O God! O God! there is a woman who speaks of love and who deceives me; there is a man who speaks of friendship, and who advises me to distract myself in debauch; there is another woman who weeps and who wants to console me with the muscles of her flanks; there is a Bible that speaks of God, and that answers: "Perhaps; all that is indifferent."

I rushed towards my open window: "Is it true, then, that thou art void?" I exclaimed as I looked at a great pale sky that was unfolding over my head. "Answer, answer! Before I die, will you put aught else than a dream into these two arms here?"

A deep silence reigned on the place overlooked by my windows. As I remained with my arms extended and my eyes lost in space, a swallow uttered a plaintive cry; I followed it with my eye in spite of myself; while it was disappearing like an arrow in the distance, a young girl passed, singing.

VIII

I did not want to yield, however. Before coming to take life really on its pleasant side, which seemed to me its sinister side, I had resolved to try everything. Thus I remained for a very long time a prey to numberless sorrows and tormented by terrible dreams.

The great reason that kept me from being cured was my youth. No matter in what place I was, no matter what occupation I imposed on myself, I was able to think only of women ; the sight of a woman made me tremble. How many times I woke up in the night bathed in perspiration, to press my mouth against my walls, feeling ready to suffocate !

There had occurred to me one of the greatest of happinesses, and perhaps one of the rarest, that of giving my virginity to love. But the result of it was that every idea of pleasure of the senses was united in me with an idea of love ; that was what ruined me. For, not being able to keep myself from thinking continually of women, I could do nothing else at the same time but day and night revolve again through my head all those ideas of debauch, of false loves and of feminine treasons of which I was full. To me, to have a woman was to love ; now, I dreamt only of women, and I no longer believed in the possibility of a true love.

All these sufferings inspired me as a sort of madness ; sometimes I desired to do as monks do and to scourge myself in order to overcome my senses ; sometimes I desired to go into the street, into the country, I knew not whither, to cast myself at the feet of the first woman whom I should meet and to swear an eternal love to her.

God is my witness that I then did all in the world to distract myself and to be cured. At first, ever pre-occupied with the involuntary idea that the society of men was a resort of vice and hypocrisy, where everything resembled my mistress, I resolved to isolate myself from it, and to isolate myself completely. I resumed former studies ; I threw myself into history, into my ancient poets, into anatomy. There was in the house, on the fifth floor, an old German who was very well educated, living alone and retired. I prevailed upon him, not without difficulty, to teach me his language ; once at the business, this poor man took it to heart. My perpetual distractions afflicted him. How often, seated in close converse with me, under his smoky lamp, he remained with astonishing patience, looking at me with his hands crossed on his book, whilst I, lost in my dreams, took no notice either of his presence or of his pity ! “ My good sir,” I at last said to him, “ it is quite useless, but you are the best of men. What a task you undertake ! I must be left to my destiny ; we can do nothing with it, neither you

nor I." I know not whether he understood this language; he clasped my hand without saying a word, and there was no further question of German.

I felt immediately that solitude, instead of healing, was killing me, and completely changed the system. I went to the country and launched at a gallop into the woods, hunting; I fenced until I lost my breath; I broke myself down with fatigue, and when, after a day of sweat and racing, I reached my bed in the evening, smelling of the stable and the powder, I buried my head in the pillow, I rolled myself in my covers, and I exclaimed: "Phantom, phantom! art thou also tired? wilt thou leave me some night?"

But what was the use of these vain efforts? solitude sent me back to nature, and nature to love. When at the Rue de l'Observance I saw myself surrounded by corpses, wiping my hands on my bloody apron, pale amid the dead, suffocated by the odor of putrefaction, I turned round in spite of myself, I saw floating before my eyes verdant harvests, embalmed meadows, and the pensive harmony of evening. "No," I said to myself, "it is not science that will console me; it will be useless for me to plunge into that dead nature, I myself will die at it like a livid drowned person in the skin of a flayed lamb. I will not cure myself of my youth; let us go and live where life is, or let us die at least in the sun." I left, I took a horse, I buried myself in the promenades of Sèvres

and Chaville; I went to stretch myself on a flowery meadow, in some secluded valley. Alas! and all those forests, all those meadows cried out to me:

“What seek you? We are green, poor child, we wear the color of hope.”

Then I returned to the city; I lost myself in the dark streets; I looked at the lights of all those windows, all those mysterious nests of families, carriages passing, men bumping against each other. Oh! what solitude! what a sad smoke on those roofs! what sorrow in those tortuous streets where everything prances, works, and sweats, where thousands of unknown persons pass touching elbows; a sewer in which the bodies alone are in society, leaving the souls solitary, and where there are none but prostitutes who extend the hand to you in passing! “Corrupt thyself! corrupt thyself! thou wilt no longer suffer!” That is what the cities call out to man, what is written on the walls with charcoal, on the pavements with mud, on the countenance with extravasated blood.

And sometimes, when, seated apart in a parlor, I was attending a brilliant feast, seeing all those rosy, blue, white women dance, with their bare arms and their clusters of hair, like cherubs intoxicated with light in their spheres of harmony and beauty: “Ah! what a garden!” I said to myself, “what flowers to gather, to breathe! Ah! daisies, daisies! what will your last petal say to him who will pluck off your

leaves ! 'A little, a little, and not at all.' That is the morality of the world, that the end of your smiles. There are, covering this sad abyss that you tread so lightly, flower-strewn veils ; it is on that hideous truth that you run like hinds on the tips of your little feet !''

"Eh ! by heavens," said Desgenais, "why take it all seriously ? That is what has never been seen. Do you complain that the bottles become empty ? There are casks in the cellars, and cellars in the hill-sides. Make me a good fish-hook gilt with sweet words, with a honeyed fly for bait, and quick ! fish me in the river of forgetfulness a pretty consoler, fresh and slippery as an eel ; there will still some remain to us, although she will have slipped from between your fingers. Love, love, you will die from desiring it. Youth must pass ; and if I were you, I would rather carry off the queen of Portugal than study anatomy."

Such was the advice that I had to listen to on every occasion ; and when the hour came I took the way to my home, my heart swollen, my cloak over my face ; I knelt by the side of my bed, and my poor heart was comforted. What tears ! what vows ! what prayers ! Galileo struck the earth exclaiming : "And yet it moves !" So I struck my heart.

IX

All of a sudden, amid the blackest grief, despair, youth, and chance forced me to an act which decided my lot.

I had written to my mistress that I no longer wanted to see her, and indeed I kept my word, but I spent the nights under her windows, seated on a bench at her door ; I saw her windows lighted, I heard the sound of her piano ; sometimes I perceived her as a shadow behind her half-open curtains.

A certain night when I was on that bench, plunged in frightful sadness, I saw a belated workman pass who was staggering. He was stammering disconnected words, mingled with exclamations of joy ; then he interrupted himself with singing. He was overcome with wine, and his enfeebled limbs led him sometimes to one side of the water-course, sometimes to the other. He went and fell on the bench of another house in front of me. There he rocked himself for some time on his elbows, then he fell fast asleep.

The street was deserted ; a dry wind swept the dust ; the moon, in the midst of a cloudless sky, was lighting up the place where the man slept. I found myself, then, close to that churl, who had no idea of my presence, and who was resting on that stone more pleasantly, perhaps, than if in his bed.

In spite of myself, that man gave a diversion to my sorrow ; I arose to make way for him, then I returned and sat down again. I could not leave that door, on which I would not have knocked for an empire ; at last, after having walked in all directions, I stopped mechanically in front of the sleeper.

“What a sleep !” I said to myself. “Assuredly that man is not dreaming ; his wife, at such an hour as this, is perhaps opening to his neighbor the door of the garret in which he sleeps. His garments are in rags, his cheeks are hollow, his hands wrinkled ; he is some wretch who has not food every day. A thousand devouring cares, a thousand mortal anguishes, await him on his reawakening ; yet he had a crown in his pocket this evening, he entered a tavern in which they sold him the forgetfulness of his ills ; he earned enough in his week with which to have one night’s sleep, he has taken it, perhaps, from his children’s supper. Now his mistress may betray him, his friend may glide like a thief into his den ; I myself can strike him on the shoulder, and call to him that he is being assassinated, that his house is on fire ; he will turn over on the other side and will fall asleep again.

“And as for me, and as for me !” I continued as I traversed the street with long strides, “I do not sleep, I who have in my pocket this evening the wherewithal to make him sleep for a year ; I am so proud and so mad that I dare not enter a tavern, and I do not see

that, if all the unfortunate enter it, it is because happy ones leave it. O God! a bunch of grapes crushed under the soles of the feet suffices to dissipate the darkest cares and to break all the invisible ropes that the genii of evil stretch in our way. We weep like women, we suffer like martyrs; it seems to us, in our despair, that a world has crumbled over our head, and we sit down in our tears like Adam at the gate of Eden. And, to heal a wound wider than the world, it suffices to make a little motion of the hand and to moisten our breast. What miseries, then, are our sorrows, since they are thus consoled? We are astonished that Providence, who sees them, does not send its angels to hear us in our prayers; it has no need to take so much trouble; it has seen all our sufferings, all our desires, all our pride of fallen angels, and the ocean of evils that surrounds us, and it is satisfied with suspending a little black fruit over the borders of our path. Since this man sleeps so well on this bench, why should I not sleep likewise on mine? My rival, perhaps, spends the night with my mistress; he will leave her at daybreak; she will accompany him half-naked to the door, and they will see me asleep. Their kisses will not awaken me, and they will tap me on the shoulder; I will turn over on the other side and will go to sleep again."

Thus, filled with a fierce joy, I set out in search of a tavern. As it was after midnight, nearly all were closed; that made me furious. "What!" I thought,

“even this consolation will be refused to me !” I ran in all directions, knocking at the shops and calling : “Wine ! wine !”

At last I found a tavern open : I asked for a bottle, and, without observing whether it was good or bad, I swallowed it gulp after gulp ; a second one followed, then a third. I treated myself like a sick person, and I forced myself to drink, as if it were a matter of a remedy ordered by a physician, a question of life or death.

Ere long the vapors of the dark liquor, which was no doubt adulterated, surrounded me with a cloud. As I had drunk hurriedly, drunkenness seized upon me all of a sudden ; I felt my ideas becoming mixed, then calmed, then mixed again. At last, reflection abandoning me, I raised my eyes to the heavens, as if to bid adieu to myself, and stretched myself out with my elbows on the table.

Then only did I perceive that I was not alone in the room. At the other extremity of the tavern was a group of hideous men, with ghastly figures and rough voices. Their costume bespoke that they were not of the people, without their being of the bourgeois ; in a word, they belonged to that ambiguous class, the vilest of all, which has neither calling, nor fortune, nor even an industry, except it be an ignoble industry, which is neither poor nor rich, and which has the vices of the one and the wretchedness of the other.

They were discussing in an undertone disgusting cards; in the midst of them was a girl very young and very pretty, neatly dressed, and who seemed to resemble them in nothing, except in voice, which was also hoarse and cracked too, with a rosy countenance, as if she had been a public crier for sixty years. She was looking at me attentively, no doubt astonished at seeing me in a tavern; for I was elegantly attired and almost choice in my toilet. Gradually she approached; passing in front of my table, she took up the bottles that were there, and, seeing all three of them empty, she smiled. I saw that she had superb teeth of sparkling whiteness; I took her hand, and begged her to be seated beside me; she did so with good grace and asked, as her order, that some supper be brought to her.

I looked at her without saying a word, and my eyes were filled with tears; she noticed this, and asked me why, but I could not answer her; I shook my head as if to make my tears flow more abundantly, for I felt them trickling down my cheeks. She understood that I had some secret sorrow, and did not try to divine its cause; she took out her handkerchief, and, while supping very pleasantly, she wiped my face from time to time.

There was in that girl something so indescribably horrible and so sweet, and an impudence so singularly mingled with pity, that I did not know what to think of her. If she had taken my hand in the street, she would have horrified me; but it seemed to me so odd

that a creature whom I had never seen, whoever she was, should come, without saying a word to me, sup in front of me, and wipe away my tears with her handkerchief, that I remained spellbound, at the same time disgusted and delighted. I understood the tavern-keeper to ask her if she knew me; she answered yes, and that I be let alone. Ere long the players departed, and, the tavern-keeper having passed into the room back of his shop after having closed his door and his outside shutters, I remained alone with this girl.

All that I had just done had come so quickly, and I had obeyed such a strange impulse of despair, that I thought I was dreaming, and that my thoughts were struggling in a labyrinth.

It seemed to me either that I was mad, or that I had obeyed a supernatural power.

“Who are you?” I exclaimed to myself suddenly; “what do you want of me? how do you know me? who told you to wipe away my tears? Is it your trade that you are practising, and do you think that I want you? I would not touch you even with the end of my finger. What are you doing there? answer. Is it money you want? For how much do you sell that pity that you have?”

I arose and wanted to leave; but I felt that I was staggering. At the same time my eyes became dim, a mortal weakness took possession of me, and I fell on a stool.

“You are suffering,” said that girl to me as she took hold of my arm ; “you have drunk like a youth that you are, not knowing what you were doing. Stay on this chair, and wait for a hack to pass in the street ; you will tell me where your mother lives, and he will take you home, as in truth,” she added smiling, “you find me homely.”

As she spoke I raised my eyes. Perhaps it was the intoxication that deceived me ; I do not know whether I had seen indistinctly until then, or saw indistinctly at that moment ; but I suddenly perceived that that unfortunate one bore on her countenance a fatal resemblance to my mistress. I felt chilled at this sight. There is a certain shiver that takes hold of a man’s hair ; the common people say it is death that is passing over your head, but it was not death that was passing over mine.

It was the malady of the age, or rather that girl was it herself ; and it was she who, under those pale and mocking traits, with that hoarse voice came and sat down in front of me in the farther end of the tavern.

X

As soon as I had perceived that this woman resembled my mistress, a frightful, an irresistible idea had taken possession of my sick brain, and I at once carried it out.

During the early days of my loves, my mistress had sometimes come to visit me by stealth. Those were feast days in my little room ; flowers arrived there, the fires sparkled brightly, I prepared a good supper ; the bed had also its nuptial deckings to receive the dearly beloved. Often, seated on my sofa, under the glass, I had contemplated her during the silent hours when our hearts spoke to each other. I looked at her, like to the Fairy Mab, changing into a paradise that little solitary space where so often I had wept. She was there amid all those books, all those scattered garments, all those battered articles of furniture, between those four gloomy walls : how sweetly she shone amid all that poverty !

These memories, as soon as I had lost her, pursued me unrelentingly ; they robbed me of sleep. My books, my walls, spoke to me of her : I could not bear them. My bed drove me into the street ; I had a horror of it, when I was not weeping there.

I brought, then, that girl thither ; I told her to be seated and to turn her back to me ; I made her get half-undressed. Then I put my room in order around her as formerly for my mistress. I placed the armchairs where they were on a certain evening that I recalled. Generally, in all our ideas of happiness there is a certain memory that dominates ; a day, an hour that surpassed all the others, or, if not, that was the type and ineffaceable model for them ; a moment comes, amid all that, when man has exclaimed, like Theodore in *Lope de*

Vega's comedy: "Fortune! drive a gold nail in your wheel."

Having thus arranged everything, I kindled a great fire, and, seating myself on my heels, I began to feel intoxicated with an unbounded despair, I went down into the bottom of my heart, to feel it twist and contract. Yet I murmured in my head a Tyrolean romance that my mistress was incessantly singing:

Altra volta gieri biele,
Blanch' e rossa com' un' flore;
Ma ora nô. Non son più biele,
Consumatis dal' amore.²

I heard the echo of that poor romance resound in the desert of my heart. I said: "That is man's happiness; that is my little paradise; that is my Fairy Mab, that a girl of the streets. My mistress is worth no more. That is what one finds at the bottom of the glass from which one has drunk the nectar of the gods; that is the corpse of love."

The unfortunate one, hearing me sing, began to sing also. I became as pale as death at this; for that rough and ignoble voice, emerging from that being that resembled my mistress, seemed to me like a symbol of what I was experiencing. It was debauch personified that was thickening the words in her throat, amid a blooming youth. It seemed to me that my mistress, since her

perfidy, must have a voice like that. I remembered Faust, who, dancing at the Brocken with a naked young sorceress, saw a red mouse emerge from her mouth.

“Silence!” I called to her. I arose and approached her; she seated herself smiling on my bed, and I stretched myself beside her like my own statue on my tomb.

I ask you, you, men of the age, who, at this present hour, are rushing to your pleasures, to the ball or to the opera, and who, this evening, when you lie down, read yourselves to sleep with some hackneyed blasphemy of old Voltaire's, some reasoning trifle of Paul-Louis Courier, some speech on economics of a committee of our Chambers, who, in a word, respire, through some one of your pores, the cold substances of that monstrous water-lily which Reason plants in the heart of our cities; I ask you, if perchance this obscure book should fall into your hands, not to smile with a lofty disdain, not to shrug your shoulders too much; do not say to yourselves too assuredly that I am complaining of an imaginary evil; that after all, human reason is the finest of our faculties, and that there is no truth here below but the stock-jobbing of the Bourse, gambling dens, Bordeaux table wine, good health of body, indifference to others, and in the evening, in bed, limber muscles covered with a perfumed skin.

For some day, amid your stagnant and motionless life, a gale of wind may pass. Those fine trees that

you water with the tranquil waters of your rivers of forgetfulness, Providence may blow over them ; you may be in despair, you impassible men ; there are tears in your eyes. I will not tell you that your mistresses may betray you : that is not to you so painful a thing as when one of your horses dies ; but I will tell you that people lose at the Bourse, that when people play a trump, they may meet a higher ; and, if you do not play, remember that your crowns, your moneyed peace, your gold and silver happiness are with a banker who may fail or in public funds that may not pay ; I will tell you that, in fine, cold though you be, you can love something ; a fibre in the depths of your entrails may be distended, and you may utter a cry resembling that of pain. Some day, wandering in the muddy streets, when material enjoyments will no longer be there to occupy your indolent powers, when the real and the daily will be wanting to you, you may perchance come to look around you with hollow cheeks, and to seat yourself on a deserted bench at midnight.

O men of marble, sublime egoists, inimitable reasoners, who have never been guilty of an act of despair or of an error in arithmetic, if that ever happens to you, at the time of your ruin, recall Abelard when he had lost Héloïse. For he loved her more than you do your horses, your gold crowns and your mistresses ; for he had lost, in separating from her, more than you will ever lose, more than your Prince Satan himself would

lose by falling a second time from heaven ; for he loved her with a certain love of which the newspapers do not speak, and the shadow of which your wives and daughters do not observe on our stages and in our books ; for he had spent half his life in kissing her on her fair brow, in teaching her to sing the psalms of David and the canticles of Saul ; for he had only her upon earth ; and yet God consoled him.

Believe me, when in your distress you think of Abelard you will not see with the same eye the mild blasphemies of old Voltaire and Courier's triflings ; you will feel that human reason can heal illusions, but not heal sufferings ; that God has made it a good house-keeper, but not a Sister of Charity. You will find that the heart of man when he said : "I believe in nothing, for I see nothing," had not said its last word. You will seek around you something like a hope ; you will go to throw back the church doors to see whether they still move, but you will find them walled up ; you will think of becoming Trappists, and the destiny that taunts you will answer you with a bottle of wine of the people and a courtesan.

And if you drink the bottle, if you take the courtesan and bring her to your bed, know what may come of it.

PART SECOND

PART SECOND

I

On awaking next day I felt so profound a disgust for myself, I found myself so abased, so degraded in my own eyes, that a horrible temptation seized me on the first impulse. I bounded out of bed, I ordered the creature to dress and to leave as soon as possible ; then I sat down, and, as I surveyed the walls of my room with desolate looks, my eyes stopped mechanically towards the corner where my pistols hung.

At the very time when suffering thought advances, as it were, with outstretched arms towards annihilation, when our soul adopts a violent decision, it seems that, in the physical action of taking down a weapon, of getting it ready, in the very coldness of the iron, there

is a material horror, independent of the will; the fingers adjust themselves with anguish, the arm becomes stiff. Whenever a man walks to death, entire nature recoils in him. Thus I cannot express what I felt while that girl was dressing, unless it were as if my pistol had said to me: "Think of what you are going to do."

Since then, indeed, I have often thought of what would have happened to me if, as I wanted, the creature had dressed in haste and retired at once. No doubt the first effect of shame would have been calmed; sorrow is not despair, and God has united them as brothers, so that one should never leave us alone with the other. Once the air of my room was free from that woman, my heart would have been comforted. There would have remained to me only repentance, and the angel of celestial pardon forbids repentance to kill. But no doubt, at least, I was cured for life; debauch was forever driven from my threshold, and I would never again incur the feeling of horror with which her first visit had inspired me.

But it happened quite otherwise. The struggle that was taking place in me, the poignant reflections that were overwhelming me, disgust, fear, wrath itself—for I felt a thousand things at one and the same time—all these fatal powers nailed me to my armchair; and, while I was thus a prey to the most dangerous delirium, the creature, leaning in front of the mirror, only thought of adjusting her dress as best she could, and

arranged her hair with the most tranquil smile in the world. All that by-play of coquetry lasted over a quarter of an hour, during which I had almost come to forget her. At last, at every sound she made, turning around impatiently, I begged her to leave me alone in a tone of wrath so marked that she was ready in a moment, and turned the door-knob as she threw me a kiss.

At the same instant some one knocked at the outer door. I arose precipitately, and had only time to open for the creature a closet into which she rushed. Desgenais entered almost immediately with two young men of the neighborhood.

Those great water currents that we find in the midst of seas resemble certain events in life. Fatality, Chance, Providence, what matters the name? Those who think they deny the one, by opposing to it the other, only abuse language. There is not, however, one of those very men who, in speaking of Cæsar or of Napoléon, does not say naturally: "He was the man of Providence." They apparently believe that heroes alone are worthy of having Heaven concerned about them, and that the color of purple attracts the gods as it does bulls.

As for what is decided here below by the most trifling things, as to what changes in our fortune are brought about by apparently the least important circumstances, there is not, to my mind, a deeper abyss for thought.

It is with our ordinary actions as with little blunted arrows that we accustom ourselves to speed to the target, or almost so, so that we come to make of all these small results an abstract and regular being that we call our prudence or our will. Then a gust of wind passes, and, behold, the smallest, the lightest, the most futile of these arrows rises out of sight beyond the horizon into the immense bosom of God.

What violence then takes possession of us! What becomes of those phantoms of tranquil pride, the will and prudence? Force itself, that mistress of the world, that sword of man in the battle of life, it is in vain that we brandish it wrathfully, that we try to cover ourselves with it so as to escape a blow that threatens us; an invisible hand turns its edge aside, and the whole force of our effort, turned into the void, serves only to make us fall farther on.

Thus, at the moment when I was aiming only at clearing myself of the error that I had been guilty of, perhaps even of punishing myself for it, at the very instant when a profound horror was taking possession of me, I learned that I had to bear a dangerous trial to which I succumbed.

Desgenais was in the best of spirits; stretching himself on the sofa, he began with some bantering regarding my countenance, which, he said, had not slept well. As I was far from well disposed to bear his pleasantries, I curtly entreated him to spare me them.

He did not seem in a humor to pay any attention to this; but, in the same tone, he approached the subject that brought him. He came to tell me that my mistress had not only had two lovers at the same time, but three, that is, that she had treated my rival as badly as me; which the poor youth having learned, he made a terrible fuss about it, and all Paris knew it. I at first rather imperfectly understood what he said to me, not having listened attentively; but when, after having got him to repeat it as many as three times in the most minute detail, I had become thoroughly acquainted with the facts of this terrible history, I remained abashed and so stunned that I could not answer. My first impulse was to laugh at it, for I saw clearly that I had loved only the lowest of women; but it was none the less true that I had loved her, and, to express it more clearly, that I loved her still. "Is it possible?" that is all I could find to say.

Desgenais's friends then confirmed all that he had said. It was in her own house that my mistress, taken by surprise between her two lovers, had on her part experienced a scene that everybody knew by heart. She was dishonored, obliged to leave Paris, unless she wanted to expose herself to the most cruel scandal.

It was easy for me to see that in all these pleasantries there was a good share of ridicule thrown in regarding my duel about that same woman, my invincible passion for her, in fine, regarding my entire conduct in respect

to her. To say that she merited the most odious names, that she was, after all, only a wretch who had, perhaps, done something a hundred times worse than what was known of her, was to make me feel bitterly that I was but a dupe like so many others.

All that did not please me ; the young men, who took notice of it, were discreet about it ; but Desgenais had his plans ; he had taken it on himself as a task to heal me of my love, and he treated it pitilessly as a malady. A long friendship, founded on mutual services, gave him rights ; and, as his motive seemed to him laudable, he did not hesitate to exercise them.

Not only, then, did he not spare me, but, from the moment that he saw my trouble and my shame, he did everything in the world to push me along that road as far as he could. My impatience soon became too obvious to allow him to continue ; he stopped then and adopted the part of silence, which irritated me even more.

In my turn I put questions ; I walked hither and thither through the room. It had been unbearable to me to listen to that story being told ; I would have liked some one to repeat it to me. I strove to assume sometimes a laughing air, sometimes a tranquil mien ; but it was in vain. Desgenais had suddenly become mute, after having shown himself as a most detestable gabbler. While I was walking with long strides, he was looking at me with indifference, and left me to toil in the room like a fox in the menagerie.

I cannot tell what I felt. A woman who had for so long a time been the idol of my heart, and who, since I had lost her, caused me such keen suffering, the only one whom I had loved, she whom I wanted to weep for until death, become all of a sudden shameless and brazen-faced, the subject of young men's by-talk, of universal censure and scandal! It seemed to me that I was feeling on my shoulder the impression of a red-hot iron, and that I was marked with a burning stigma.

The more I reflected, the more I felt night thicken around me. From time to time I turned my head around and I perceived a glacial smile or a look of curiosity that was watching me. Desgenais did not leave me; he clearly understood what he was doing: we knew each other for a long time; he was well aware that I was capable of every folly, and that the exaltation of my character might draw me beyond all bounds, in any direction whatever, except in a single one. That is why he belittled my suffering and appealed from my head to my heart.

When at last he saw me at the point to which he desired to bring me, he no longer delayed inflicting the last blow on me. "Does the story displease you?" he said to me. "Here is the best, which is the end of it. It is, my dear Octave, that the scene at ——'s took place on a certain night when the moon was shining brightly; now, while the two lovers were quarreling their best at the lady's house, and talking of

cutting each other's throats at the side of a good fire, it appears that in the street was seen a shadow which was moving very quietly, and which resembled you so very closely that it was concluded it was you."

"Who has said so?" I replied; "who saw me in the street?"

"Your mistress herself; she tells it to whoever wants to hear it, quite as gayly as we tell you her own history. She holds that you love her still, that you mount guard at her door, in fine, — all that you think; but it suffices for you to know that she speaks of it publicly."

I have never been able to lie, and, every time that it has happened to me to want to disguise the truth, my countenance has always betrayed me. Pride, the shame of acknowledging my weakness before witnesses, led me, however, to make an effort. "It is quite certain," I said to myself, moreover, "that I was in the street. But if I had known that my mistress was still worse than I believed her to be, no doubt I would not have been there." At last I persuaded myself that I could not have been seen distinctly; I endeavored to deny. The color mounted to my countenance with such force that I myself felt the uselessness of my feigning. Desgenais smiled at it. "Take care," I said to him, "take care! let us not go too far!"

I continued walking like a madman, I did not know whom to blame. It would have been right to laugh,

and that was still more impossible. At the same time, evident signs taught me my failing ; I was convinced. "But did I know it?" I exclaimed to myself, "did I know that that wretched woman ——"

Desgenais bit his lip as if to signify: "You knew it well enough."

I stopped short, at every moment stammering a ridiculous phrase. My blood, excited for the past quarter of an hour, began to beat in my temples with a force to which I was no longer equal.

"I in the street, bathed in tears, in despair! and at that moment this meeting in her house! What! that very night jeered at by her! she to jeer! Verily, Desgenais! are you not dreaming? Is it true? is it possible? What do you know about it?"

Thus speaking at random, I lost my head; and during that time an insurmountable wrath dominated me ever more and more. At last I sat down exhausted, my hands trembling.

"My friend," said Desgenais to me, "do not take the matter seriously. This solitary life that you have been leading for the past two months is doing you much harm: I see it, you need diversions. Come this evening and have supper with us, and to-morrow, dinner in the country."

The tone in which he spoke these words did me more harm than all else. I felt that I was exciting his pity, and that he was treating me as a child.

Motionless, sitting apart, I was making vain efforts to gain some control over myself. "What!" I thought, "betrayed by that woman, poisoned with horrible advice, having nowhere found a refuge, neither in work nor in fatigue; when I have, at the age of twenty, as my only safeguard against despair and corruption, a holy and fearful sorrow, O God! it is this very sorrow, this sacred relic of my suffering, that they have just broken in my hands! It is not my love, it is my despair that they insult! To jeer! she to jeer, when I am weeping!" That seemed to me incredible. All the memories of the past flowed back to my heart when I thought of it. I seemed to see arise one after another the spectres of our nights of love; they were leaning over a bottomless, eternal abyss, black as oblivion; and over the depths of the abyss vibrated a sweet and mocking burst of laughter: "Behold your reward!"

If they had only told me that the world was mocking me, I would have replied: "So much the worse for it," and would not have been otherwise grieved; but they told me at the same time that my mistress was only a wretch. Thus, on the one hand, the ridicule was public, averred, corroborated by two witnesses who, before relating what they had seen, could not fail to say on what occasion: the world was right, I was wrong; and, on the other hand, what answer could I make to it? on what could I depend? wherein shut myself up? what do, when the centre of my life, my

heart itself, was ruined, slain, annihilated? What am I saying? when that woman, for whom I would have braved everything, ridicule as well as blame, for whom I would have let a mountain of misery be heaped upon me; when that woman, whom I loved, and who loved another, and whom I did not ask to love me, of whom I wanted nothing but permission to weep at her door, nothing but, far from her, to devote my youth to her memory, and to write her name, her name only, on the tomb of my hopes! — Ah! when I thought of it I felt myself dying; it was that woman who jeered me; it was she who, the first, pointed a finger at me, pointed me out to that idle multitude, to that empty and irksome people, that goes about chuckling around all that contemns it and forgets it; it was she, it was from her lips so often sealed to mine, it was from that body, from that soul of my life, my flesh and my blood, it was thence that came the insult, yes, the last of all, the most cowardly and the most bitter, laughter without pity, that spits in the face of grief.

The more I penetrated into my thoughts, the more my wrath increased. Is it wrath I must call it? for I know not what name is borne by the feeling that was agitating me. What is certain is that a disordered thirst for vengeance gained the upper hand of me. And how be avenged on a woman? I would have paid whatever was asked to have at my disposal a weapon that could strike her down; but what weapon? I had none, not even

that which she had used ; I could not answer her in her own language.

Suddenly I perceived a shadow behind the curtain of the glass door ; it was the creature who was waiting in the closet.

I had forgotten her. "Listen !" I exclaimed to myself, as I arose in a transport ; "I have loved, I have loved like a madman, like a simpleton. I have deserved all the ridicule that you desire. But, by Heaven ! I must show you something which will prove to you that I am not yet so stupid as you believe."

As I said this I struck my foot against the glass door, which gave way ; I showed them that girl who had been cowering in a corner.

"Go in there, then," I said to Desgenais ; "you who find me madly in love with one woman and who love only the girls, do you not see your supreme wisdom stretched out there in that armchair ? Ask her if my entire night has been spent under ——'s windows ; she will tell you something about it. But that is not all," I added, "it is not all that I have to tell you. You have a supper this evening, to-morrow a country-party ; I am going, and believe me, for I will not leave you from now until then. We will not separate, we are going to spend the day together ; you will have fencing, cards, dice, punch, what you will, but you will not get away from it. Are you with me ? I am at your service ; done ! I wanted to make my heart the mausoleum of

my love ; but I will cast my love into another tomb, O God of Justice ! when I ought to bury it in my heart."

At these words I sat down again, while they went into the closet, and I felt how the indignation that comforts itself may give us joy. As for him who may be astonished that from that day I completely changed my life, he does not know man's heart, and he does not know that one may hesitate twenty years about taking a step, but will not retrace it once he has taken it.

II

Apprenticeship in debauch is like a vertigo : in it, at first one experiences an indescribable terror mingled with pleasure, as if on a high tower. While shameful and secret libertinage degrades the noblest man, in free and bold disorder, in what we may call debauch in broad daylight, there is some grandeur, even to the most depraved. He who, at nightfall, goes off, his cloak over his nose, incognito, to soil his life and clandestinely to throw off the hypocrisy of the day, resembles an Italian who strikes his enemy from behind, not daring to provoke him to a duel. Assassination lurks in boundary corners and in expectation of night ; while, in the chaser after noisy orgies, one would almost conceive a warrior ; it

is something that smacks of fight, an appearance of superb contest. "Everybody does it, and keeps it quiet; do it, and do not keep it quiet." Thus speaks Pride, and, once this cuirass is put on, it is the sun that shines there again.

It is related that Damocles saw a sword hanging over his head; it is thus that libertines seem to have over them a something indescribable which is incessantly calling out to them: "Go, go ever; I am holding on to a thread." Those masquerade carriages that one sees in Carnival time are the faithful image of their life. A broken-down coach, open to the four winds, flamboyant torches illuminating powdered heads; those laugh, these sing; in the midst move figures somewhat like women: they are indeed remains of women, with almost human semblance. They are caressed, they are insulted; one knows neither their names, nor who they are. All that floats and hovers under the flaming rosin, in an intoxication that thinks of nothing, and over which, it is said, a God watches. They have the appearance, at moments, of leaning over and embracing; there is one of them that has fallen in a jolt; what matters it? one comes from thence, one goes thither, and the horses gallop.

But if the first impulse is astonishment, the second is horror, and the third pity. There is there, in effect, so much force, or rather so strange an abuse of force, that it often happens that the noblest characters and the finest organizations allow themselves to be caught

in it. That seems to them bold and dangerous ; they thus make themselves prodigal of themselves ; they attach themselves to debauch like Mazeppa to his wild beast ; they bind themselves fast to it, they make themselves Centaurs ; and they see neither the pathway of blood marked by the shreds of their flesh on the trees, nor the eyes of the red-stained wolves that follow in their track, nor the desert, nor the crows.

Launched on that life by the circumstances that I have mentioned, now I have to tell what I saw there.

The first time that I had a close view of those notorious assemblies that we call theatrical masked balls, I had heard the debauches of the Regency spoken of, and a queen of France disguised as a dealer in violets. There I found dealers in violets disguised as sutlers. I expected libertinism, but in truth there is none of it there. Filth, blows, and girls dead drunk on broken bottles, is not libertinism.

The first time that I saw table debauches, I had heard mention made of the suppers of Heliogabalus, and of a Grecian philosopher who had made of the pleasures of the senses a sort of natural religion. I expected something like forgetfulness, if not like joy ; I found there what is worst in the world, tedium trying to live, and Englishmen who said to themselves : "I do this or that, then I amuse myself. I have paid so many gold pieces, therefore I enjoy so much pleasure." And they spend their life on this millstone.

The first time that I saw courtesans, I had heard mention made of Aspasia, who sat down on Alcibiades' knee while discussing with Socrates. I expected something giddy, insolent, but yet gay, brave, and vivacious, something like the sparkling of champagne; I found a yawning mouth, a staring eye, and crooked hands.

The first time that I saw titled courtesans, I had read Boccaccio and Bandello; above all, I had read Shakespeare. I had dreamt of those frisky beauties, of those cherubs of hell, of those female high livers full of graceful movement to whom the cavaliers of the *Decameron* offer holy water as they are going away from Mass. I had a thousand times sketched those heads so poetically silly, so inventive in their audacity, of those mad-brained mistresses that unfold to you a whole romance in a glance, and that walk in life only by waves and shocks, like undulating sirens. I remembered those fairies of the *Nouvelles Nouvelles*, who are ever tipsy from love, if they are not drunk from it. I found female scribblers, arrangers of rendezvous, setters of precise hours, who know only how to lie to strangers and to bury their baseness in their hypocrisy, and who see in all that only something to give themselves up to and to forget.

The first time that I entered a gambling house, I had heard mention made of oceans of gold, of fortunes made in a quarter of an hour, and of a lord of the court of Henri IV. who won on one card a hundred thousand

crowns at the cost of his coat. I found a wardrobe dealer's where workmen, who have only a single shirt, hire a coat at twenty sous an evening, gendarmes seated at the door, and famished men gambling a slice of bread against a pistol shot.

The first time that I saw any assembly whatever, public or not, open to any one of the thirty thousand women who, in Paris, are permitted to sell themselves, I had heard mention made of the saturnalia of all times, of all the orgies possible, from Babylon to Rome, from the temple of Priapus to the Parc-aux-Cerfs, and on the threshold of the door I had always seen a single word written: "Pleasure." No longer do I find in this time but a single word: "Prostitution;" and I have always seen it there ineffaceable, not engraved on that proud metal which bears the color of the sun, but on the palest of all, that which the cold light of night seems to have tinted with its wan rays, silver.

The first time that I saw the people — it was on a frightful morning, on an Ash Wednesday, on the slope of La Courtille. Since the evening before, a fine and glacial rain was falling; the streets were pools of mud. The masquerade carriages were filing off pell-mell, bumping, rubbing against one another, between two long hedges of hideous men and women, standing on the sidewalk. This wall of sinister spectators had, in their wine-reddened eyes, a tiger hatred. For the distance of a league all grumbled, whilst the carriage wheels

grazed their breasts without making them move a step backwards. I was standing on the bench, the carriage being open ; from time to time a man in rags came out of the hedge, vomited a torrent of insults in our face, then threw a cloud of flour at us. Ere long we received mud ; yet we continued to mount, reaching L'Ile-d'Amour and the pretty wood of Romainville, where so many sweet embraces on the grass were formerly given. One of our friends, seated on the bench, at the risk of being killed, fell on the pavement. The people rushed at him to club him to death : it was necessary to run thither and surround him. One of the trumpeters, who preceded us on horseback, was hit with a paving-stone on the shoulder : flour failed. I had never heard mention made of anything like that.

I began to understand the age and to know in what time we are living.

III

Desgenais had organized a gathering of young men at his country-house. The best wines, a splendid table, cards, dancing, horse-racing, nothing was wanting to it. Desgenais was rich and of great magnificence. He had an old-time hospitality with manners of the present time. Moreover, one found the best books at his

house ; his conversation was that of an educated and well-bred man. That man was a problem.

I had brought to his house a taciturn humor that nothing could overcome ; he respected it scrupulously. I did not answer his questions, he asked me no more ; the important thing to him was that I had forgotten my mistress. Yet I went to the hunt, I showed myself at table as good a guest as the others ; he did not ask more of me.

There are not wanting in the world such folks, who take it to heart to do you a service, and who would remorselessly throw the heaviest paving-stone at you to crush the fly that is annoying you. They are anxious only to keep you from doing evil, that is, they are uneasy unless they have made you like themselves. Having attained this end, no matter by what means, they rub their hands, and the idea does not occur to them that you might have fallen from bad to worse ; all that from honest friendship.

One of the great misfortunes of inexperienced youth is to picture the world according to the first objects that strike it ; but, it must be acknowledged, there is also a race of very unfortunate men : they are those who, in such case, are always there to say to youth : "You are right in believing in evil, and we know what there is of it." I have heard, for example, something singular spoken of : it was, as it were, a mean between good and evil, a certain arrangement between

heartless women and men worthy of them ; they called that passing sentiment. They spoke of it as of a steam engine invented by a coach-builder or a building contractor. They said to me : " People are agreed on this or on that, people pronounce such phrases as call for such others in answer, people write letters in such a way, people kneel in such another." All that was regulated like a parade ; those good people had gray hair.

That made me laugh. Unfortunately for me, I cannot tell a woman whom I despise that I love her, even while knowing that it is conventional and that she will not be misled thereby. I have never bent my knee without yielding my heart. So, that class of women whom we call easy, is unknown to me, or, if I have allowed myself to be taken with them, it is without knowing it and from simplicity.

I understand that one may put his soul aside, but not that one touches it. That there may be pride in saying so, is possible ; I mean neither to boast nor to belittle myself. I hate, above all, women who laugh at love and allow them to love me in turn ; there will never be any dispute between us.

Those women are far below courtesans : courtesans may lie, and those women also ; but courtesans can love, and those women cannot. I remember a woman who loved me, and who told a man, three times richer than I, with whom she was living : " You weary me, I

am going to find my lover." That girl was worth more than many others whom one does not pay.

I spent the entire season at Desgenais', where I learned that my mistress had gone away, and that she had left France ; this news gave to my heart a languor that has never left me.

At the sight of that world so new to me which I had around me in that country, I felt myself at first taken with an odd sort of curiosity, sad and profound, that made me look crosswise like a skittish horse. This is the first thing that gave occasion to it. Desgenais had then a very pretty mistress, who loved him dearly : one evening as I was walking with him, I said to him that I found her such as she was, that is, admirable, as well for her beauty as for her attachment to him. In short, I eulogized her with warmth, and gave him to understand that he ought to be happy on her account.

He made no answer. It was his way, and I knew him to be the driest of men. Night having come, and each having retired, a quarter of an hour after I had gone to bed I heard a knocking on my door. I called out to my visitor to come in, thinking it was some one troubled with insomnia.

I saw a woman enter, paler than death, half-naked and with a bouquet in her hand. She came and presented to me her bouquet ; a piece of paper was attached to it, on which I found these few words : " To Octave, his friend Desgenais, on account of revenge."

I had no sooner read that than a flash crossed my mind. I understood all that there was in this action of Desgenais, in thus sending me his mistress and making her a sort of Turkish present to me, from some words I had said to him. From the character that I knew him to have, there was in that neither ostentation of generosity nor trait of rakishness; there was only a lesson. That woman loved him; I had praised her to him, and he wanted to teach me not to love her, whether I should take her or refuse her.

That set me thinking; that poor girl wept, and dared not wipe her tears, afraid lest I should notice them. With what had he threatened her so as to make her come? I did not know. "Mademoiselle," I said to her, "you need not grieve. Go to your room and fear nothing." She answered that, if she left my room before next morning, Desgenais would send her back to Paris; that her mother was poor, and that she could not make up her mind to it. "Very well," I said to her, "your mother is poor, probably you are also, so that you would obey Desgenais if I wished. You are beautiful, and that might tempt me. But you are weeping, and, your tears not being for me, I have only to do the rest. Go, and I will see to preventing your being sent back to Paris."

A thing that is peculiar to me is that meditation, which, with the greater number, is a firm and constant quality of the mind, is in me only an instinct

Part Second Chapter III

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independent of my will, which seizes me by fits like a violent passion. It comes to me at intervals, at its time, in spite of myself, and no matter where. But wherever it comes, I am powerless against it. It draws me whither it seems good to it and on what road it pleases.

That woman having left, I assumed a sitting posture. "My friend," I said to myself, "behold what God sends you. If Desgenais had not wanted to give you his mistress, he was not perhaps mistaken in believing that you would have fallen in love with her.

"Have you looked at her aright? A sublime and divine mystery was accomplished in the entrails that conceived her. Such a being costs nature her most vigilant maternal regard; yet the man who wants to cure you has found nothing better than to force you to her lips in order there to unlearn how to love.

"How is that done? Others than you have no doubt admired her, but they ran no risk; she could try on them all the seductions that she wished; you alone were in danger.

"It must be, however, whatever be his life, that this Desgenais has a heart, since he lives. In what does he differ from you? He is a man who believes in nothing, fears nothing, who has neither care nor weariness, perhaps, and it is clear that a slight prick on the heel would fill him with terror; for, if his body abandoned him, what would become of him? There is nothing

living in him but the body. What, then, is this creature who treats his soul as the Flagellants treat their flesh? Is it that one can live without a head?

“Think of that. There is a man who holds in his arms the most beautiful woman in the world; he is young and ardent; he finds her beautiful, he tells her so; she answers that she loves him. Thereupon, some one slaps him on the shoulder and says to him: ‘She is dissolute.’ Nothing more; he is sure of her. If one had said to him: ‘She is a poisoner,’ he would, perhaps, have loved her, he would not give her a single kiss the less; but she is a jade, and there will be no more question of love than of the star Saturn.

“What, then, is that word? a just, merited, positive, dishonoring, understood word. But, in fine, what? a word, nevertheless. Does one kill a body with a word?

“And if you, aye! you, love that body? One pours out a glass of wine for you, and one says to you: ‘Do not love that, one gets four of them for six francs. And if you become tipsy?’

“But this Desgenais loves his mistress, since he pays her; he has, then, a particular way of loving? No, he has nothing of the sort; his way of loving is not love, and he feels it no more for the woman who merits it than for her who is unworthy of it. He loves no one, that is all.

“Who, then, has brought him to that? was he born thus, or has he become so? To love is as natural as to

drink and to eat. He is not a man. Is he an abortion or a giant? What! always sure of that impassible body? Truly, even to casting himself without danger into the arms of a woman who loves him. What! without blanching? Never any other exchange than gold for flesh? What a feast, then, is his life, and what brewings does one drink there in its cups? Behold him, at thirty, like old Mithridates; the poisons of vipers are his friends and intimates.

“There is a great secret in that, my boy, a key to take hold of. On whatever reasonings one may support debauch, one will prove that it is natural one day, one hour, this evening, but not to-morrow, or every day. There is not a people on earth that has not considered woman either as man’s companion and consolation, or as the sacred instrument of his life, and, under both these forms, who has not honored her. Yet, behold an armed warrior who jumps into the abyss that God has dug with His own hands between man and animal; it would be as well to deny speech. What mute Titan is there, then, who would dare trample the love of the mind under the kisses of the body, and to plant on the lips the stigma that makes the brute, the seal of eternal silence?

“There is in that a word worth knowing. There whistles thereunder the wind of those mournful forests that we call secret corporations, one of those mysteries that the angels of destruction whisper in one another’s

ear, when night descends on the earth. That man is worse or better than God has made him. His entrails are like those of sterile women : either nature has only blocked them out, or some poisonous herb was distilled into them in the dark.

“ Well, neither work nor study has been able to cure you, my friend. To forget and to learn, be that thy motto. You were turning over the leaves of dead books ; you are too young for ruins. Look about you, the pale troop of men surrounds you. The sphinxes’ eyes sparkle among the divine hieroglyphics ; decipher the book of life ! Courage, scholar, jump into the Styx, the invulnerable river, and may its funereal waves lead you to death or to God.”

IV

“ All that there was of good in that, supposing that there could be any, is that these false pleasures were seeds of sorrow and bitterness that fatigued me so that I could bear them no longer.” Such are the simple words that were said, in regard to his youth, by the most manlike man who has ever been, St. Augustine. Of those who have done as he did, few would say these words, all have them in their hearts ; I find no others in mine.

Having returned to Paris, in the month of December, after the season, I spent the winter in pleasure parties, in masquerades, in suppers, rarely leaving Desgenais, who was delighted with me ; I was scarcely so. The more I went about, the more care I felt in me. It seemed to me, at the end of a very short time, that this world so strange, which at first sight had appeared to me an abyss, was becoming contracted, so to say, at each step ; where I had believed I had seen a spectre, in proportion as I advanced, I saw only a shadow.

Desgenais asked me what was the matter with me. "And you," I said to him, "what ails you ? Do you recall any dead relative ? Have you not some wound that humidity opens afresh ?"

Then it sometimes seemed to me that he heard me without answering. We threw ourselves on a table, drinking until our heads swam ; in the middle of the night we took post-horses, and went to breakfast ten or twelve leagues away in the country ; on returning, to the bath, thence to table, thence to play, thence to bed ; and when I was at the side of mine — then I pushed the door-bolt, I fell on my knees and I wept. That was my evening prayer.

Strange thing ! I took pride in passing for what in reality I was not at all ; I boasted of doing worse than I was doing, and I found an odd pleasure, mingled with sorrow, in that charlatanism. When I had really done

what I related, I felt only weariness ; but when I invented some folly, such as a story of debauch or the recital of an orgie at which I had not attended, it seemed to me that my heart was more satisfied, I know not why.

What did me most harm was when, at a pleasure party, we went into some place in the environs of Paris where I had formerly been with my mistress. I became stupid, I went off alone, apart, looking at the shrubs and the trunks of trees with unbounded bitterness, even kicking them as if to reduce them to dust. Then I returned, repeating a hundred times in succession between my teeth : "God scarcely loves me, God scarcely loves me !" I remained then for hours without speaking.

That fatal idea, that truth is nudity, returned to me on every occasion. "The world," I said to myself, "calls its varnishing, virtue ; its rosary, religion ; its trailing cloak, propriety. Honor and morality are its chambermaids ; it drinks in its wine the tears of the poor in spirit who believe in it ; it walks abroad with downcast eyes as long as the sun is in the heavens ; it goes to church, to the ball, to the assemblies, and when evening comes it unties its robe, and one perceives a naked bacchanalian with two goat's feet."

But while speaking thus, I horrified myself ; for I felt that, if the body was under the coat, the skeleton was under the body. "Is it possible that that is all?" I

asked myself in spite of myself. Then I returned to the city, I met on my way a pretty little girl holding her mother's arm, I followed her with my eyes as I sighed, and I became again, as it were, a child.

Though I had assumed every-day customs with my friends, and though we had regulated our disorder, I did not neglect going into society. The sight of women caused me unendurable trouble ; I touched their hands only in trembling. My course was taken never to love again. Yet I returned on a certain evening from a ball with my heart so sick that I felt that it was love. I found myself at supper beside a woman, the most charming and the most distinguished whose memory has remained to me. When I shut my eyes to go to sleep, I saw her before me. I believed myself lost ; I resolved at once not to meet her again, to shun all the places to which I knew that she was going. This sort of fever lasted a fortnight, during which I remained almost constantly stretched on my sofa, endlessly recalling, in spite of myself, even the slightest words that I had exchanged with her.

As there is no place under heaven where one is concerned with his neighbor so much as at Paris, not a very long time elapsed before the people of my acquaintance, who met me with Desgenais, had declared that I was the greatest of libertines. In that I admired the intelligence of the world ; in proportion as I had passed for a ninny and a novice at the time of my rupture with my

mistress, so I passed now for being hard-hearted and obdurate. People came to say to me that it was very clear I never loved that woman, that I was no doubt making a play of love, which was great praise that people thought they were bestowing on me ; and the worst of the matter is, that I was puffed up with vanity so wretched, that it delighted me.

My pretension was to pass for being case-hardened, at the same time that I was full of desires and that my exalted imagination was carrying me beyond all bounds. I began to say that I could not take any stock in women ; my head spent itself in chimeras that I said I preferred to the reality. At last, my only pleasure was to misrepresent myself. It sufficed that a thought be extraordinary, that it shock common sense, for me at once to make myself its champion, at the risk of advancing most censurable opinions.

My greatest fault was the imitating of everything that struck me, not by reason of its beauty, but of its strangeness, and, not wishing to confess myself an imitator, I lost myself in exaggeration, so as to appear original. To my taste, nothing was good, or even passable ; nothing was worth the trouble of a turn of the head ; yet, as soon as I warmed up to a discussion, it appeared as if there was not in the French language any expression sufficiently bombastic to praise what I upheld ; but it was sufficient to side with me to cool all my ardor.

This was a natural sequel to my conduct. Disgusted with the life that I was leading, I did not, however, want to change it :

Simigliante a quella 'nferna
Che non può trovar posa in su le piume,
Ma con dar voltà suo dolore scherma.

DANTE.

Thus I tormented my mind to deceive it, and I fell into all sorts of caprices to escape from myself.

But while my vanity was thus occupied, my heart was suffering, so that there was almost constantly in me one man who was laughing and another who was weeping. It was like a perpetual rebound from my head to my heart. My own banterings sometimes gave me extreme pain, and my deepest sorrows gave me a desire to burst out laughing.

A man boasted one day of being proof against superstitious fears and of not being afraid of anything ; his friends put a human skeleton in his bed, then posted themselves in an adjoining room to trap him when he came in. They heard no noise ; but, next morning, when they entered his room, they found him fixed in a sitting posture and playing with the bones : he had lost his reason.

There was in me something like to that man, if it was only that my favorite bonelets were those of a

well-beloved skeleton; they were the ruins of my love, all that remained to me of the past.

It must not be said, however, that in all that disorder there were not good moments. Desgenais' companions were young men of distinction, a goodly number were artists. We sometimes spent delightful evenings together, under the pretext of playing the libertine. One of them was then taken with a pretty singer who charmed us with her sweet and melancholy voice. How often we remained, seated in a circle, to listen to her, while the table was being set! How often one of us, at the moment when the flasks were uncorked, held in the hand a volume by Lamartine and read in a voice full of emotion! You should have seen then how every other thought disappeared. The hours flew during that time; and, when we sat down to table, what singular libertines we made! we said not a word, and we had tears in our eyes.

Desgenais especially, habitually the coldest and driest of men, was incredible in those days; he gave himself up to opinions so extraordinary that one would have called him a poet in delirium. But, after those expansions, it happened that he would feel himself seized with a furious joy. He broke everything as soon as the wine had warmed him; the genius of destruction emerged from his head fully armed; and I have seen him, sometimes, in the midst of his follies, dashing a chair at a closed window with such uproar as to make one hide.

I could not help making that strange man a subject of study. He appeared to me as the marked type of a class of men who must exist somewhere, but who were unknown to me. One knew not, when he was acting, whether it was the despair of a sick man or the whim of a spoiled child.

He showed himself off particularly on feast days in a state of nervous excitement that drove him to conduct himself like a veritable school-boy. His composure then would make one laugh to split one's sides. He persuaded me one day to go out with him on foot, both of us, alone, at dusk, muffled up in grotesque costumes, with masks and musical instruments. We promenaded thus all night, gravely, amid the most frightful charivari. We found a driver of a coach for hire asleep on his seat; we unyoked the horses; after which, feigning to be leaving a ball, we called him with loud shouts. The driver awoke, and at the first crack of the whip that he gave, his horses started on a trot, leaving him thus perched on his seat. We were the same evening in the Champs-Élysées; Desgenais, seeing another carriage pass, stopped it, neither more nor less than a robber; he intimidated the driver by his threats, and forced him to get down and stretch himself flat on his belly. It was a play for which one would risk one's life. He opened the carriage, however, and within we found a young man and a woman, motionless from fright. He told me then to imitate him, and, having opened both

doors, we began to enter by the one and leave by the other, so that in the darkness the poor people in the carriage believed it was a procession of bandits.

I picture to myself that men who say that the world gives experience ought to be very much astonished that people believe them. The world is only whirls, and between these whirls there is no relation ; everything goes off in flocks, like flights of birds. The different quarters of a city do not even resemble one another, and, to any one of the *Chaussée-d'Antin*, there is as much to be learned in *Le Marais* as in *Lisbon*. It is only true that these different whirls have been traversed, since the world has existed, by seven personages ever the same : the first is called hope ; the second, conscience ; the third, opinion ; the fourth, envy ; the fifth, sorrow ; the sixth, pride ; and the seventh is called man.

We were, then, my companions and I, a flight of birds, and we remained together until the spring-time, sometimes playing, sometimes running —

“ But,” the reader will say, “ in the midst of all that, what women had you ? In that I do not see debauch in person.”

O creatures who bore the name of women, and who have passed like dreams in a life that was itself only a dream, what shall I say of you ? Where there never was the shadow of a hope, can it be that there would be some memory ? Wherein shall I find memories of

you? What is there more mute in the human memory? What is there more forgotten than you?

If women must be spoken of, I will cite two of them ; here is one :

I ask you, what would you have a poor seamstress do, young and pretty, eighteen years old, and consequently having desires ; having a novel on her desk, which treats only of love ; knowing nothing, having no idea of morality ; sewing forever at a window before which, by order of the police, processions no longer pass, but in front of which stroll every evening a dozen licensed girls, recognized by the same police ; what would you have her do when, after having wearied her hands and her eyes during a whole day on a dress or a hat, she leans on her elbows for a moment at that window at nightfall? That dress which she has sewed, that hat which she has trimmed with her poor and honest hands, to get the wherewith to have supper at her house, she sees them pass on the head and on the body of a public girl. Thirty times a day there stops a hired carriage at her door, and there comes out of it a prostitute numbered like the hack that trundles her, who comes with a disdainful air to make faces in front of a mirror, to try on, to take off and to put on again ten times that sad and patient work of her vigils. She sees that girl take from her pocket six gold pieces, she who has one a week ; she looks at her from head to foot, she examines her decking,

she follows her as far as her carriage ; and then, what would you ? when the night is quite dark, on an evening when work fails, when her mother is sick, she opens her door, stretches out her hand, and stops a passer-by.

Such was the history of a girl whom I have known. She knew a little how to play the piano, a little how to count, a little how to draw, even a little history and grammar, and so a little of everything. How often I looked with poignant compassion at that rough model of nature, mutilated still further by society ! How often I followed, in that depth of night, the pale and vacillating glimmers of a suffering and aborted spark ! How often I tried to relight some dead coals under those poor ashes ! Alas ! her long hair was in reality of the color of ashes, and we called her Cendrillon.

I was not rich enough to give her masters ; Desgenais, following my advice, interested himself in that creature ; he made her learn anew all of which she had the elements. But she was never able to make decided progress in anything : as soon as her master had left, she crossed her arms and remained thus for whole hours, looking through the window-panes. What days ! what misery ! I threatened one day, if she did not work, to leave her without money ; she set silently to work, and I learned a short time afterwards that she went out by stealth. Whither did she go ? God knows. I entreated her, before she left, to embroider a purse for me ; I kept that sad relic for a long time ; it

was hung up in my room as one of the gloomiest monuments of all that is ruin here below.

Now here is another :

It was about ten o'clock in the evening, when, after a whole day of excitement and fatigue, we betook ourselves to Desgenais', he had preceded us by some hours to make his preparations. The orchestra was already placed, and the parlor full on our arrival.

Most of the dancers were theatre-girls ; it was explained to me why they were worth more than others ; it was that everybody snatches at them.

Scarcely had I entered when I threw myself into the whirl of the waltz. This truly delightful exercise has always been dear to me ; I know of no other more noble, nor that is more worthy in every respect of a pretty woman and a young man ; all dances, compared with that one, are only insipid conventionalities or pretexts for the most insignificant conversations. To hold a woman in one's arms for half an hour is truly to possess her in a certain sense, and to drag her along thus, palpitating in spite of herself, and not without some risk, so that one could not say whether one protects or forces her. Some give themselves up then with such voluptuous shame, with such sweet and pure abandonment, that one does not know whether what one feels near them is desire or fear, and whether, in pressing them to one's heart, one would swoon away or would break them like reeds. Germany, where this

dance was invented, is certainly a country where one loves.

I held in my arms a superb dancer of an Italian theatre, who had come to Paris for the Carnival; she was in bacchanalian costume, with a panther-skin robe. Never have I seen anything so languishing as that creature. She was tall and thin, and, while waltzing with extreme rapidity, she had the appearance of dragging; on seeing her, one would have said that she fatigued her waltzer; but one did not feel her, she ran as if by enchantment.

On her bosom was an enormous bouquet, whose perfumes intoxicated me in spite of myself. At the slightest movement of my arm, I felt her bend like a convolvulus of the Indies, full of a softness so sweet and so sympathetic that she enfolded me like a sail of embalmed silk. At each turn one scarcely heard a slight rubbing of her necklace on her metal girdle; she moved so divinely that I believed I saw a beautiful star, and all that with a smile, like a fairy that is going to fly away. The waltz music, tender and voluptuous, appeared as if emerging from her lips, whilst her head, loaded with a forest of black hair braided in plaits, inclined backwards, as if her neck were too weak to carry it.

When the waltz was ended I threw myself on a chair at the end of a boudoir; my heart beat, I was beside myself. "O God!" I exclaimed to myself, "how is that possible? O superb monster! O beautiful reptile!

sweet serpent, with your supple and spotted skin ! how you entwine, how you undulate. How your cousin the Serpent has taught you to coil around the Tree of Life, with the apple on your lips ! O Mélusine ! O Mélusine ! the hearts of men are yours. You know it well, enchantress, with the mellow languor that has not the air of doubting it ! You know well that you are killing, you know well that you are drowning, you know well that one is going to suffer when one has touched you ; you know that one dies of your smiles, of the perfume of your flowers, of contact with your delights : that is why you give yourself up with such softness ; that is why your smile is so sweet, your flowers so fresh ; that is why you pose your arm so sweetly on our shoulder. O God ! O God ! what, then, do you desire of us ?”

Professor Hallé has said a terrible word : “ Woman is the nervous part of humanity, and man the muscular part.” Humboldt himself, that serious scholar, has said that around the human nerves is an invisible atmosphere. I do not speak of the dreamers who follow the zigzag flight of Spallanzani’s bats, and who think they have found a sixth sense in nature. However that may be, the mysteries of the nature that creates us, rocks us, kills us, are sufficiently awful, and its powers too profound, without making it necessary to thicken the darkness that surrounds us. But who is the man who thinks he has lived if he denies the power of

woman? if he has never left a beautiful dancer with trembling hands? if he has never felt that indescribable, indefinable, that enervating magnetism which, in the midst of a ball, at the noise of the instruments, at the warmth that pales the lustres, comes by degrees from a young woman, electrifies her, and frolics around her like the perfume of aloes on the censer that is swung in the wind?

I was stricken with a profound stupor. That such an intoxication exists when one loves, was not new to me : I knew what that aureole was that the well-beloved radiates. But to excite such heart-beatings, to call up such phantoms, with nothing but her beauty, flowers, and the dappled skin of a wild beast, with certain movements, a certain mode of turning in a circle, which she learned of some juggler, with the contours of a fine arm ; and that without a word, without a thought, without her deigning to seem to know it ! What, then, was chaos, if that was the work of the seven days ?

It was not love, however, that I felt, and I cannot call it anything else, unless it was thirst. For the first time in my life, I felt vibrating in my being a chord foreign to my heart. The sight of that beautiful animal had made another one bellow in my entrails. I felt indeed that I would not have told that woman that I loved her, or that she was pleasing to me, or even that she was beautiful ; there was nothing on my lips but the desire to kiss hers, to say to her : " Make me a

girdle of those indolent arms ; rest that inclining head on me ; seal that sweet smile to my mouth." My body loved hers ; I was taken with beauty as one is taken with wine.

Desgenais passed, and he asked me what I was doing there. "Who is that woman?" I said to him. He answered: "What woman? of whom do you speak?"

I took him by the arm and led him into the hall. The Italian woman saw us coming. She smiled ; I took a step backwards. "Ah ! ah !" said Desgenais, "you have waltzed with Marco?"

"Who is Marco?" I said to him.

"Well ! she is that sloth who is laughing down there ; does she please you?"

"No," I replied, "I have waltzed with her, and I want to know her name ; she does not please me otherwise."

It was shame that made me speak thus ; but, as soon as Desgenais had left me, I ran after him.

"You are very prompt," he said, laughing. "Marco is not an ordinary girl ; she is engaged and almost married to Monsieur de —, ambassador at Milan. It is one of his friends who has brought her to me. Yet," he added, "count on me going to speak to him ; we will let you die only when there will be no other resource. It may be that we shall succeed in having her stay here for supper."

Thereupon he moved away. I could not say how restless I felt on seeing him approach her; but I could not follow them, they were lost in the crowd.

"Is it true, then?" I said to myself, "should I come to that? What! in an instant! O God! could it be that I am going to love? But, after all," I thought, "it is my senses that are acting; my heart does not count for anything in that."

I thus sought to calm myself. A few moments later, however, Desgenais slapped me on the shoulder. "We will have supper in a little while," he said to me; "you will give your arm to Marco; she knows that she has been pleasing to you, and that is agreed upon."

"Listen," I said to him; "I do not know what I am experiencing. It seems to me that I see Vulcan with a lame foot covering Venus with his kisses, with his besmoked beard, in his forge. He is fixing his wild eyes on the thick flesh of his prey. He is concentrating himself in the sight of that woman, his only good; he is striving to laugh with joy, he looks as if he was shuddering with happiness; and, during that time, he remembers his father Jupiter, who is seated on the summit of heaven."

Desgenais looked at me without answering; he took hold of my arm and drew me away. "I am tired," he said to me, "I am sad; this noise is killing me. Let us go to supper, that will set us up again."

The supper was splendid ; but I only attended at it. I could not touch anything : my lips failed me. "What is the matter with you, then?" said Marco to me. But I remained like a statue, and I looked at her from head to foot in mute astonishment.

She began to laugh, and Desgenais also, who was watching us from a distance. In front of her was a large crystal glass cut in the form of a cup, which reflected on a thousand sparkling facets the light from the lustres and which shone like the prism of the seven rainbow colors. She extended her indolent arm, and filled the cup to the brim with a golden wave of Cyprus wine, of that sugared wine of the East which later on I found so bitter on the deserted strand of the Lido. "Take it," she said as she presented it to me, "*per voi, bambino mio.*"

"For you and me," I said to her, presenting the glass to her in turn. She moistened her lips with it, and I emptied it with a sadness that she seemed to read in my eyes.

"Is it bad?" she said. "No," I replied. "Or may be you have a headache?" "No." "Or perhaps you are weary?" "No." "Ah, then! it is a weariness of love?" While speaking thus in her jargon, her eyes became serious. I knew that she was from Naples, and, in spite of herself, while speaking of love, her Italy was beating in her heart.

Another folly followed thereupon. Heads were already getting warm, glasses were clinking ; already

there was mounting to the palest cheeks that slight purple with which wine colors the countenance, as if to forbid modesty to appear there ; a confused murmur, like that of the rising tide, rumbled in shocks ; looks were enkindled here and there, then were suddenly fixed and remained vacant ; I know not what wind made all those uncertain intoxications float toward one another. A woman arose as does in a still, tranquil sea the first wave that feels the tempest, and which gets ready to announce it ; she made a sign with the hand to ask for silence, emptied the cup with one gulp, and, with the gesture that she made, she pulled off her head-dress ; a mass of golden hair rolled down over her shoulders ; she opened her lips and wanted to intone a convivial song ; her eye was half-closed. She breathed with effort ; twice did a hoarse sound emerge from her oppressed chest ; a mortal paleness suddenly covered her, and she fell back on her chair.

Then began a hubbub which, for more than an hour that the supper yet lasted, did not cease until the end. It was impossible to distinguish anything there, either laughter, or song, or even calling.

“What do you think of it ?” Desgenais said to me.

“Nothing,” I answered ; “I close my ears and look on.”

Amid that bacchanal, the beautiful Marco remained mute, drinking nothing, resting quietly on her bare arm and letting her slothfulness dream. She seemed neither

astonished nor moved. "Do you not want to do as they are doing?" I asked her; "you who offered me Cyprus wine a little while ago, do you not want to taste it also?" I poured out for her, while saying that, a large glass full to the brim; she raised it slowly, drank it in one draught, then put the glass back on the table, and resumed her heedless attitude.

The more I observed this Marco, the more singular she appeared to me; she took pleasure in nothing, but neither did she weary of anything. It seemed as difficult to annoy her as to please her; she made one put questions to her, but not of her own motion. I thought of the genius of eternal rest, and I said to myself that, if that pale statue became a somnambulist, it would resemble Marco.

"Are you good or wicked?" I said to her, "sad or gay? Have you loved? Do you wish any one to love you? Do you love money, pleasure, what? horses, the country, the ball? what pleases you? of what are you dreaming?" And to all these questions the same smile on her part, a joyless and painless smile, which meant: "What matters it?" and nothing more.

I brought my lips close to hers; she gave me a kiss as vacant and indolent as herself, then she raised her handkerchief to her mouth. "Marco," I said to her, "woe to him who would love you!"

She lowered her black eye on me, then raised it toward heaven, and, pointing a finger in the air, with

that Italian gesture which cannot be imitated, she sweetly pronounced the great feminine word of her country: *Forse!*

Yet they served dessert; several of the guests had arisen; some were smoking, others had taken to playing, a small number remained at table; some women were dancing, others were sleeping. The orchestra returned; the candles were growing pale, they put others in their place. I recalled Petronius's supper, where the lamps are extinguished around yawning masters, while slaves enter on tiptoe and steal the silver. Amid all that, songs were ever going on, and three Englishmen, three of those sad-looking figures to whom the Continent is a hospital, continued, in spite of everything, the most ominous ballad that has sprung from their marshes.

"Come," I said to Marco, "let us leave!" She arose and took my arm. "Until to-morrow!" Desgenais called out to me; we left the room.

On approaching Marco's lodging, my heart was beating violently; I could not speak. I had no idea of such a woman; she felt neither desire nor disgust, and I knew not what to think on seeing my hand tremble beside that emotionless being.

Her room was, like herself, dark and voluptuous; an alabaster lamp half lighted it. The arm-chairs, the sofa, were as soft as beds, and I believe that everything there was made of down and of silk. On entering I was struck with a strong odor of Turkish pastilles, not of

Part Second Chapter XV

*She extended her indolent arm and filled the cup to the brim with a golden wave of Cyprus wine. * * * "Take it," she said as she presented it to me, "per voi, bambino mio."*

"For you and me," I said to her, presenting the glass to her in turn.



those that are sold here in the streets, but of those of Constantinople, which are the most nervous and the most dangerous of perfumes. She rang, a chambermaid entered. She passed with her into her alcove without saying a word to me, and, a few moments later, I saw her lying down, resting on her elbow, always in the indolent posture that was habitual to her.

I was standing and I was looking at her. Strange, the more I admired her, the more beautiful I found her, the more I felt the desires vanish with which she inspired me. I know not whether it was a magnetic effect; her silence and her lack of emotion won me. I did as she did, and I stretched myself on the sofa in front of the alcove, and the coldness of death went down into my soul.

The beatings of the blood in the arteries are a strange clock that one feels vibrate only at night. Man, abandoned then by external objects, falls back on himself; he hears himself live. Despite fatigue and sadness, I could not close my eyes; Marco's were fixed on me; we looked at each other in silence, and slowly, if one may so speak.

"What are you doing there?" she said at last; "are you not coming to me?"

"Yes, indeed," I replied; "you are very beautiful!"

A weak sigh was heard, like a plaint: one of the chords of Marco's harp had just snapped. I turned my head at this sound, and I saw that the pale tint of the first rays of dawn was coloring the windows.

I arose and I opened the blinds ; a bright light penetrated into the room. I approached a window and stopped for a few moments : the sky was clear, the sun cloudless.

“ Will you come, then ? ” Marco repeated.

I made her a sign to wait further. Some reasons of prudence had made her choose a quarter removed from the heart of the city ; perhaps she had another lodging elsewhere, for she received sometimes. Her lover’s friends came to her house, and the room in which we were was no doubt only a retreat for lovers ; it looked out on the Luxembourg, whose garden stretched afar before my eyes.

Like a cork that, plunged into water, seems restless under the hand that holds it, and slips between the fingers to ascend to the surface, so was agitated in me something that I could neither overcome nor remove. The sight of the alleys of the Luxembourg made my heart bound and every other thought vanished. How often, on those little knolls, playing truant, I had stretched myself under the shade, with some good book, quite filled with foolish poesy ! for, alas ! those were the debauches of my childhood. I found again those far-off memories on the stripped trees, on the withered grass of the landscapes. There, when I was ten years old, I had walked with my brother and my preceptor, throwing bread to some poor benumbed birds ; there, seated in a corner, I had for hours watched the little girls dancing

in a ring ; I listened to my artless heart beating to the refrains of their childish songs ; there, returning from college, I had a thousand times traversed the same alley, lost in a verse of Virgil, and driving a pebble with my foot. "O my childhood ! it is here !" I exclaimed to myself ; "O my God ! Thou art here !"

I turned around. Marco had gone to sleep, the lamp had gone out ; the light of day had changed the entire appearance of the room : the hangings, which had seemed to me of an azure blue, were of a greenish and faded tint, and Marco, the beautiful statue, stretched in the alcove, was as livid as a corpse.

I shuddered in spite of myself ; I looked at the alcove, then at the garden : my weary head was becoming heavy. I took a few steps, and I went and sat down in front of an open secretary, near another window. I was resting myself on it, and was looking mechanically at an unfolded letter that had been left upon it : it contained only a few words. I read them several times in succession without paying any attention to them, until their meaning became intelligible to my thought by force of recurring to it ; I was suddenly struck by it, though it was not possible for me to take in everything. I took the paper, and read what follows, written in bad orthography :

"She died yesterday. At eleven o'clock in the evening she felt herself failing ; she called me, and said to me : 'Louison, I am going to rejoin my comrade ; you

are to go to the wardrobe, and you are to take down the cloth that is on the nail; it is the fellow of the other.' I threw myself on my knees weeping, but she extended her hand, exclaiming: 'Do not weep! do not weep!' And she heaved such a sigh ——"

The rest was torn. I cannot picture the effect that this sinister reading produced on me; I turned the paper over and saw Marco's address, the date, the day before. "She is dead? and who, then, is dead?" I exclaimed to myself involuntarily as I went to the alcove. "Dead! who, then? who, then?"

Marco opened her eyes; she saw me seated on her bed, the letter in my hand. "It is my mother," said she, "who is dead. You are not coming near me, then?"

And, saying that, she stretched out her hand. "Silence!" I said to her; "sleep, and leave me here." She turned over and went to sleep again. I looked at her for some time, until, having assured myself that she could no longer hear me, I moved away and left quietly.

V

I was seated one evening by the fireside with Desgenais. The window was open; it was one of those first days of March, that are the harbingers of spring; it had rained, a sweet odor came from the garden.

"What shall we do, my friend," I said to him, "when spring is come? I feel a desire to travel."

"I shall do," said Desgenais to me, "what I did last year; I shall go to the country when it will be time to go there."

"What!" I replied, "do you do the same thing every year? You are going, then, to begin your life again this year?"

"What do you want me to do?" he answered.

"Right!" I exclaimed as I jumped up; "yes, what will you have me do? you have well said. Ah! Desgenais, how all that tires me! Are you never weary of this life that you are leading?"

"No," he said to me.

I was standing in front of an engraving that represented the Magdalen in the desert; I joined my hands involuntarily. "What are you doing, then?" Desgenais asked me.

"If I were a painter," I said to him, "and if I wanted to paint melancholy, I would not paint a dreamy young girl, with a book in her hands."

"Of whom are you thinking this evening?" he said, laughing.

"No, indeed," I continued; "this Magdalen in tears has her bosom swollen with hope; this pale and sickly hand, on which she rests her head, is still embalmed with the perfumes which she poured on Christ's feet. Do you not see that in this desert there is a people

who meditate, who pray? There is no melancholy in that."

"It is a woman reading," he replied in a dry voice.

"And a happy woman," I said to him, "and a happy book."

Desgenais understood what I wanted to say; he saw that a deep sorrow was taking possession of me. He asked me if I had any cause for grief. I hesitated to answer him, and I felt my heart break.

"At last, my dear Octave," he said to me, "if you have a subject that gives you pain, do not hesitate to confide it to me; speak openly, and you will find a friend in me."

"I know it," I replied, "I have a friend; but my pain has no friend."

He pressed me to explain myself. "Well," I said to him, "if I explain myself, of what service will that be to you, since you can do nothing for it, any more than I can? Is it the bottom of my heart that you ask of me, or is it only the first word that comes, and an excuse?"

"Be frank," he said to me.

"Well," I replied, "well, Desgenais, you have given me advice in proper season, and I entreat you to listen to me, as I listened to you then. You ask me what I have in my heart, I am going to tell you.

"Take the first man who comes along, and say to him: 'There are folks who spend their life in drinking,

in horseback riding, in laughing, in playing, in making use of all sorts of pleasure ; no shackle restrains them ; they have as their law whatever pleases them, women as many as they want ; they are rich. Of other cares, not one ; all days are feast-days to them.' What do you think of it ? Unless that man be a strict devotee, he will answer you that it is human weakness, if he does not answer you simply that it is the greatest happiness that can be imagined.

“Then lead that man to action ; set him at table, a woman by his side, a glass in his hand, a handful of gold every morning, and then say to him : ‘There is your life. Whilst you will be asleep beside your mistress, your horses will prance in the stable ; whilst you will be making your horse wheel on the promenade strand, the wine will be ripening in your cellars ; whilst you will be spending the night in drinking, the bankers will be increasing your wealth. You have only to wish, and your desires become realities. You are the happiest of men ; but take care lest you drink one evening beyond measure and lest you will no longer find your body ready for joys. That will be a great misfortune, for all sorrows are consoled, except those. You will gallop some fine night in the forest with joyous companions ; your horse will make a false step, you will fall into a trench full of mire, and you will run the risk of your companions, filled with wine, in the midst of their glorious hilarity, not hearing your cries of anguish ;

take care lest they pass without perceiving you, and lest the sound of their joy do not penetrate into the forest, whilst you are dragging yourself along in the darkness on your broken limbs. You will lose at gambling some evening ; fortune has its bad days. When you shall have returned home and sat at your fireside, beware of striking your brow, of letting grief moisten your eyelids, and of casting your eyes here and there with bitterness, as when one is looking for a friend ; be careful, especially about thinking all of a sudden, in your solitude, of those who have over there, under some thatched roof, a peaceful household and who sleep holding each other's hand ; for, in front of you, on your splendid bed, will be seated, as your sole confidant, the pale creature who is the lover of your crowns. You will recline upon her to comfort your oppressed bosom, and she will make the reflection that you are very sad, and that the loss must be considerable ; the tears in your eyes will cause her great care, for they are capable of letting the dress grow old that she is wearing, and of making the rings fall from her fingers. Do not mention the name of him who has won from you that evening ; it might be that she would meet him to-morrow, and that she would make soft eyes to your ruin. That is what human weakness is : are you compelled to have it ? Are you a man ? be on your guard against disgust ; it is, moreover, an incurable evil : a corpse is worth more than a living person disgusted with living. Have you a heart ? be on

your guard against love ; it is worse than an evil for a debauchee, it is a ridiculous thing ; debauchees pay their mistresses, and the woman who sells herself has the right of contempt only over a single man in the world—him who loves her. Have you passions? be on your guard against your countenance ; it is a shame for a soldier to cast off his armor, and for a debauchee to appear to hold to anything whatever ; his glory consists in touching nothing but with marble hands rubbed with oil, on which everything ought to slip. Are you hot-headed? If you want to live, learn to kill : wine is sometimes quarrelsome. Have you a conscience? be careful about your sleep ; a debauchee who repents too late is like a vessel that takes water ; it can neither return to land nor continue its voyage ; it is all very well for the winds to drive it, the ocean attracts it, it turns on itself and disappears. If you have a body, be on your guard against suffering ; if you have a soul, be on your guard against despair. O unhappy man ! beware of men ; as long as you walk in the way you are in now, you will seem to see an immense plain on which is displayed in flowery garlands a *farandole* of dancers who hold one another like the rings of a chain ; but that is only a slight mirage ; those who look at their feet know that they are dancing on a silk thread stretched over an abyss, and that the abyss swallows up many silent falls without a ripple on its surface. May your foot not fail you ! Nature herself feels her divine

sympathy withdraw from you ; the trees and the reeds no longer recognize you ; you have falsified your mother's laws, you are no longer the foster-children's brother, and the birds of the fields are silent on seeing you. You are alone. Be on your guard against God ! you are alone before Him, standing up, like a cold statue, on the pedestal of your will. The rain of heaven no longer refreshes you, it undermines you, it torments you. The passing wind no longer gives you the kiss of life, the sacred communion of all that breathes ; it shakes you, it makes you stagger. Each woman whom you embrace takes a spark of your strength without giving you back one of her own ; you are exhausting yourself on phantoms ; where a drop of your perspiration falls, there springs up one of the inauspicious plants that grow in the cemeteries. Die ! you are the enemy of all that loves ; sink into your solitude, do not wait for old age ; leave no child on earth, do not fecundate a corrupted blood ; efface yourself like smoke, do not deprive the growing grain of wheat of a ray of sunshine ! ”

As I finished these words I fell into an arm-chair, and a stream of tears flowed from my eyes. “ Ah ! Desgenais,” I exclaimed to myself sobbing, “ is not that what you have said to me ? Did you not know it, then ? And, if you did know it, why did you not say so ? ”

But Desgenais himself had his hands clasped ; he was as pale as a shroud, and a slow tear trickled down his cheek.

There was a moment's silence between us. The clock struck ; I suddenly thought that it was just a year ago on such a day, at such an hour, that I had discovered that my mistress was deceiving me.

“Do you hear that clock?” I exclaimed to myself, “do you hear it? I do not know what it is striking at present ; but it is a terrible hour, and one that will count in my life.”

I spoke thus in a transport and without being able to unravel what was passing within me. But almost at the same instant a domestic entered the room hurriedly ; he took hold of my hand, led me aside, and said to me in quite a low tone : “Monsieur, I come to notify you that your father is dying ; he has just been seized with an attack of apoplexy, and the doctors despair of him.”

PART THIRD

PART THIRD

I

My father lived in the country, some distance from Paris. When I arrived, I found the doctor at the door, and he said to me: "You have come too late; your father would have liked to see you for the last time."

I entered and saw my father dead. "Monsieur," I said to the doctor, "I beg you to get everybody to withdraw and to leave me alone here; my father had something to say to me, and he will say it to me." At my orders, the domestics went away; I then approached the bed, and gently raised the shroud that already covered the countenance. But, as soon as I had cast my eyes on him, I hurried to embrace him, and lost consciousness.

When I recovered, I heard some one saying: "If he asks, refuse him, no matter on what pretext." I understood that they wanted to remove me from the death-bed, and I feigned to have heard nothing. As they saw that I was tranquil, they left me. I waited until everybody in the house had gone to bed, and taking a light, I betook myself to my father's room. There I found a young ecclesiastic alone, seated near the bed. "Monsieur," I said to him, "to dispute with an orphan the last vigil by his father's side is a bold undertaking; I know not what they may have said to you. Remain in the next room; if there is anything wrong, I will take it on myself."

He withdrew. A single candle placed on a table lighted the bed; I sat on the ecclesiastic's seat and discovered once more those traits that I was never to see again. "What did you want to say to me, father?" I asked him: "what was your last thought when seeking your child with your eyes?"

My father kept a diary in which he was accustomed to record everything that he did day by day. That diary was on the table, and I saw that it was open; I approached it and knelt down; on the open page were these few words only: "Adieu, my son, I love you, and I am dying."

I did not shed a tear, not a sob escaped from my lips; my throat became contracted, and my mouth was as if sealed; I looked at my father without budging.

He knew of my life, and my disorders had more than once given him reason for complaint or reprimand. I scarcely ever saw him that he did not speak to me of my future, of my youth and of my follies. His advice had often snatched me from my evil destiny, and was of great weight, for his life had been, from beginning to end, a model of virtue, peace, and goodness. I expected that before dying he had wished to see me, so as to try once more to turn me from the way on which I had entered; but death had come too quickly; he had suddenly felt that he no longer had but a word to say, and he had said that he loved me.

II

A little wooden railing surrounded my father's tomb. In accordance with his express will, manifested a long time back, he had been interred in the village cemetery. Every day I went there, and I spent a part of the day on a little bench placed inside the tomb. The rest of the time I lived alone, in the very house in which he had died, and I had with me only a single male servant.

Whatever pain the passions may cause, the sorrows of life must not be compared with those of death. The

first thing that I had felt on sitting beside my father's bed, is that I was an unreasonable child, who knew nothing and was acquainted with nothing ; I may even go as far as to say that my heart felt a physical pain on account of his death, and I sometimes twisted myself while wringing my hands, like an apprentice on awaking.

During the first months that I remained in that country, it did not occur to my mind to think either of the past or of the future. It did not seem to me that it was I who had lived until then ; what I experienced was not despair and in no respect resembled those fierce sufferings that I had felt ; it was only languor in all my actions, like weariness of and indifference to everything, but with a poignant bitterness that was gnawing me internally. All day I held a book in my hand, but I scarcely read, or, to express it better, not at all, and I know not of what I was dreaming. I had no thoughts ; everything in me was silence ; I had received a blow so violent and at the same time so prolonged, that I had come out of it, as it were, a purely passive being, and nothing in me reacted.

My servant, whose name was Larive, had been very much attached to my father ; he was, perhaps, after my father himself, the best man whom I had ever known. He was of the same build as my father and wore his clothes, for, having no livery, my father gave

them to him. He was of almost the same age, that is, his hair was turning gray, and, for the twenty years that he had not left my father, he had adopted something of his ways. While I was walking in the room after dinner, going and coming lengthwise and crosswise, I heard him doing in the antechamber just as I was doing; though the door was open, he never entered, and we said not a word to each other; but from time to time we saw each other weep. The evenings passed thus, and the sun was long set when I thought of asking for a light, or he of bringing me one.

Everything had remained in the house in the same order as before, and we had not disarranged even a piece of paper there. The large leather arm-chair in which my father sat was near the fire-place; his table, his books, placed in like manner; I respected even the dust on his furniture, which he did not like any one to disarrange in order to dust it. That lonely house, accustomed to silence and the most tranquil life, had taken notice of nothing; it seemed to me only that the walls sometimes regarded me with pity, when I enveloped myself in my father's dressing-gown and sat down in his arm-chair. A weak voice seemed to be raised and to say: "Where has the father gone? we see indeed that this is the orphan."

I received several letters from Paris, and to all I answered that I wished to spend the summer alone in the country, as my father had been accustomed to do.

I began to feel this truth, that in all evils there is ever something good, and that a great sorrow, whatever one may say of it, is a great rest. Whatever be the news they bring, when God's envoys slap us on the shoulder, they always do that good work of reawakening life in us, and where they speak, all is silence. Passing sorrows blaspheme and accuse Heaven; great sorrows neither accuse nor blaspheme, they listen.

In the morning, I spent whole hours in contemplation of nature. My windows looked out on a deep valley, and in the middle arose the village bell-tower; all was poor and peaceful. The sight of spring, of the opening flowers and leaves, did not produce on me that gloomy effect of which the poets speak, who in the contrasts of life find a mockery of death. I believe that this frivolous idea, if it be not a mere antithesis made to pleasure, belongs as yet in reality only to hearts that but half feel. The gambler who leaves at daybreak, his eyes inflamed and his hands empty, may feel himself at war with nature, as the torch of a hideous vigil; but what can the growing leaves say to a child who mourns his father? The tears in his eyes are sisters of the dew; the willow leaves are tears themselves. It is while looking at the heavens, the woods, and the meadows that I understand what men are who imagine they are consoling themselves.

Larive was no more desirous of consoling me than of consoling himself. At the time of my father's death, he

had been afraid lest I should sell the house and take him to Paris. I do not know whether he was informed of my past life, but he had shown me uneasiness at first, and, when he saw me installed, his first look went to my heart. It was on a day on which I had a large portrait of my father brought from Paris; I had it put in the dining-room. When Larive entered to serve, he saw it; he stood as if uncertain, looking sometimes at the portrait, sometimes at me; there was a joy so sad in his eyes that I could not resist it. He seemed to say to me: "What happiness! we are going, then, to suffer in peace!" I extended my hand to him, and he covered it with kisses, sobbing.

He, so to say, took care of my grief, as being the mistress of his. When I went in the morning to my father's tomb, I found him there watering the flowers; as soon as he saw me, he left and returned to the house. He followed me on my walks; as I was on horseback and he on foot, I never wanted him; but, as soon as I had gone a hundred paces in the valley, I perceived him behind me, his stick in his hand and wiping his brow. I bought a small horse for him that belonged to a peasant of the neighborhood, and we thus betook ourselves to traversing the woods.

There were in the village some acquaintances who often came to the house. My door was closed against them, though I regretted that; but I could not see any one without impatience. Shut up in my solitude, I

thought, after some time, of looking up my father's papers. Larive brought them to me with pious respect ; and, detaching the tape with a trembling hand, he spread them out before me.

On reading the first few pages I felt in my heart that freshness which vivifies the air around a tranquil lake ; the sweet serenity of my father's soul was exhaled like a perfume of dried leaves in proportion as I unfolded them. The diary of his life reappeared before me ; I could count, day by day, the beatings of that noble heart. I began to bury myself in a sweet and profound dream, and, despite the serious and firm character that dominated everywhere, I discovered an ineffable grace, the peaceful flower of his goodness. Whilst I was reading, the memory of his death was incessantly mingled with the story of his life ; I cannot tell with what sadness I followed that limpid brook that I had seen fall into the ocean.

“Oh, just man !” I exclaimed, “man without fear and without reproach ! what candor in thy experience ! Thy devotedness to thy friends, thy divine tenderness for my mother, thy admiration for nature, thy sublime love of God, that was thy life ; there was no place in thy heart for anything else. The virgin snow on the mountain peaks is not more pure than thy holy old age ; thy white hair resembled it. O father ! O father ! give it to me ; it is younger than my blond head. Let me live and die like thee ; I want to plant on the earth

where you sleep, the green branch of my new life ; I will water it with my tears, and the God of orphans will let that pious grass grow on the grief of a child and the memory of an old man.”

After having read those cherished papers, I classified them in order. I also then made the resolution to write my diary ; I had one bound similar to my father’s, and, carefully looking through his for the least occupations of his life, I took it on me as a task to make mine conform to it. Thus, at each moment of the day, the clock as it ticked made the tears come to my eyes: “That,” I said to myself, “is what my father did at this hour ;” and whether it was a reading, a walk, or a meal, I never missed it. I accustomed myself in this way to a calm and regular life ; there was in that punctual exactness an infinite charm to my heart. I went to sleep with a happiness that my sadness made more agreeable to me. My father concerned himself a great deal with gardening ; the rest of the day, study, walking, a fair division between the exercises of the body and those of the mind. At the same time I inherited his habits of beneficence, and continued to do for the unfortunate what he himself had done. I began to look in my rounds for the people who had need of me ; there was no scarcity of them in the valley. Ere long I was known to the poor ; shall I say it ? yes, I will say it boldly : where the heart is good, sorrow is healthy. For the first time in my life I was happy. God blessed my tears, and sorrow taught me virtue.

III

As I was walking one evening in a linden alley, at the entrance to the village, I saw a young woman leaving a detached house. She was dressed very simply and veiled, so that I could not see her countenance; yet her figure and walk seemed to me so charming that I followed her with my eyes for some time. As she was crossing a neighboring meadow, a white goat that was grazing at liberty in a field ran to her; she gave it some caresses and looked on one side and then on the other, as if in search of a favorite grass to give to it. I saw a wild mulberry-tree near me; I plucked a branch from it and advanced holding it in my hand. The goat came towards me with measured steps, with a timid air; then it stopped, not daring to take the branch from my hand. Its mistress made a sign to it as if to embolden it, but it looked at her in a restless way; she took a few steps towards me, laid her hand on the branch, which the goat at once seized. I saluted her, and she continued her journey.

On my return home, I asked Larive if he did not know who lived in the village at the place that I described to him; it was a small house of modest appearance, with a garden. He knew it; the only two occupants were an aged woman passing for being very

devout, and a young woman whose name was Madame Pierson. It was she whom I had seen. I asked him who she was, and if she came to my father's house. He replied that she was a widow, led a retired life, and that he had seen her sometimes, but rarely, at my father's. Nothing further was said of her, and, going out again thereupon, I returned to my lindens, where I sat on a bench.

I know not what sadness took possession of me all of a sudden on seeing the goat return to me. I arose, and, as if by distraction, looking along the path that Madame Pierson had taken on her departure, I followed it in quite a dreamy way, so much so that I wandered far up the mountain.

It was nearly eleven o'clock in the evening when I thought of returning; as I had walked a great deal, I directed my steps towards a farm-house that I noticed, to ask for a cup of milk and a slice of bread. At the same time, large drops of rain that were beginning to fall betold a storm that I wanted to let pass over. Though there was light and I heard comings and goings, no one answered me when I knocked, so that I approached a window to look whether there was any one there.

I saw a large fire lighted in the lower hall; the farmer, whom I knew, was seated near his bed; I knocked on the panes while calling him. At the same moment the door opened, and I was surprised to see Madame

Pierson, whom I recognized at once, and who asked me who was outside.

I so little expected to find her there that she noticed my astonishment. I entered the room, asking her permission to shelter myself. I did not imagine what she could be doing at such an hour at a farm-house almost lost far in the country, when a plaintive voice that came from the bed made me turn my head around, and I saw that the farmer's wife was lying with death on her countenance.

Madame Pierson, who had followed me, had sat down in front of the poor man, who seemed overwhelmed with grief; she gave me a sign not to make any noise: the patient was asleep. I took a chair and sat in a corner until the storm should pass over.

While I remained there, I saw her arise from time to time, go to the bed, and speak low to the farmer. One of the children, whom I drew upon my knees, told me that she came every evening since his mother was sick, and that she sometimes spent the night there. She filled the office of a Sister of Charity; there was no one but her in the country, and a single physician who was very ignorant. "She is Brigitte la Rose," he said to me in a low voice; "do you not know her?"

"No," I said to him in the same way; "why do they call her so?" He answered that he knew nothing of it, unless it was, perhaps, that she had been a rose winner, and that the name had stuck to her.

Madame Pierson, however, no longer had on her veil; I could see her features uncovered; just as the child left me, I raised my head. She was near the bed, holding a cup in her hand and offering it to the farmer's wife, who had awakened. She seemed to me pale and somewhat thin; her hair was of an ashy blond. She was not regularly beautiful; what shall I say of her? Her large black eyes were fixed on those of the patient, and that poor being at death's door was looking at her also. There was, in that simple exchange of charity and gratitude, a beauty that is not spoken.

The rain redoubled; a deep darkness hung over the deserted fields, which violent claps of thunder lit up at moments. The roar of the storm, the moaning wind, the wrath of the elements let loose on the thatch roof, by their contrast with the religious silence of the cabin, gave still more sanctity and, as it were, a strange grandeur to the scene to which I was a witness. I looked at the pallet, those drenched window-panes, the puffs of thick smoke driven back by the storm, the stolid dejection of the farmer, the superstitious terror of the children, all that outside fury laying siege to a dying woman; and when in the midst of all that, I saw this woman sweet and pale and coming on tiptoe, not leaving off her patient well-doing for a minute, not seeming to notice anything, either the storm, or our presence, or her own courage, unless one had need of her, it seemed to me that there was in that tranquil work something

indescribably more serene than the most beautiful cloudless sky, and that a superhuman creature, indeed, was she who, surrounded by so much horror, did not for a single instant doubt her God.

“What, then, is that woman?” I questioned myself. “Whence comes she? How long has she been here? For a long time, since they remember having seen her a rose winner. How is it I have not heard her spoken of? She comes alone to this hut, at this hour? When one danger will no longer call her, she will go in search of another? Yes, through all these storms, all these forests, all these mountains, she goes and comes, simple and veiled, bearing life where it is failing, holding this fragile little cup, caressing her goat as she passes. It is with that silent and calm step that she herself walks to death. That is what she has been doing in this valley while I have been making the rounds of the gambling houses; she was born there, no doubt, and they will bury her there in a corner of the cemetery, beside my dearly beloved father. Thus will die this obscure woman, of whom no one speaks and about whom the children ask: ‘Is it possible that you do not know her?’”

I cannot tell what I felt; I was motionless in a corner. I breathed only in trembling, and it seemed to me that if I had tried to aid her, if I had extended a hand to spare her a step, I should have committed a sacrilege and touched sacred vessels.

The storm lasted nearly two hours. When it had subsided, the patient, having sat up, began to say that she felt better and that what she had taken did her good. The children ran at once to her bed, looking at their mother with half-doubting, half-gladdened, staring eyes, and hanging on to Madame Pierson's dress.

"I really think so," said the husband, who did not budge from his place; "we have had a Mass said, and it has cost us a great deal!"

At this gross and stupid expression, I looked at Madame Pierson; her sunken eyes, her paleness, the attitude of her body, clearly showed her fatigue, and that the vigils were exhausting her. "Ah! my poor man," said the patient, "may God give it back to you!"

I could not hold out any longer; I arose as if carried away by the stupidity of those brutes, who for the charity of an angel gave thanks to the avarice of their pastor; I was ready to reproach them for their base ingratitude and to treat them as they deserved. Madame Pierson raised up one of the farmer's children in her arms, and said to it with a smile: "Embrace your mother, she is saved." I stopped on hearing these words; never has the unaffected satisfaction of a happy and benevolent soul been pictured with such frankness on so sweet a countenance. All of a sudden, I no longer found on it either her fatigue or her paleness; she was radiant with all the purity of her joy; and she also gave

thanks to God. The patient had just spoken, and what mattered it what she had said ?

A few moments later, however, Madame Pierson told the children to wake up the farm-boy, in order that he might take her back. I advanced to offer myself as her escort ; I told her it was useless to wake up the boy, as I was returning by the same road, that she would do me an honor by accepting. She asked me if I was not Octave de T——. I answered that I was, and that she perhaps remembered my father. It seemed to me singular that this request made her smile ; she cheerfully took my arm, and we departed.

IV

We walked in silence ; the wind had lulled ; the trees trembled gently as they threw the rain from their branches. Some distant lightning flashes still shone. A perfume of humid verdure arose in the cooled air. The sky soon became clear again, and the moon clothed the mountain in light.

I could not help thinking of the oddity of chance, which, in so short a time, thus made me find myself alone, at night, in a lonely country, the traveling companion of a woman of whose existence I had no knowledge at sunrise. She had accepted my escort for the name that I bore, and walked with assurance, leaning

on my arm in a careless way. It seemed to me that this confidence was quite bold or quite simple ; and it must indeed have been both, for at each step that we took I felt my heart become proud and innocent.

We began to converse about the patient whom she was leaving, of what we saw on the way ; it did not occur to us to put questions to each other as new acquaintances. She spoke to me of my father, and always in the same tone as she had assumed when I had first recalled his memory to her, that is, almost cheerfully. In proportion as I listened to her, I thought I understood why, and why she spoke thus not only of death, but of life, of suffering, and of everything in the world. It was that human sufferings taught her nothing that could accuse God, and I felt the piety of her smile.

I told her of the solitary life that I was leading. Her aunt, she said to me, saw my father more frequently than she herself did ; they played cards together after dinner. She made me promise to go to her house, where I should be welcome.

About the middle of the journey she felt fatigued, and sat down for some moments on a bench that the thick trees had protected from the rain. I remained standing in front of her, and I was looking at the pale rays of the moon falling on her forehead. After a moment's silence, she arose, and seeing me absent-minded, "What are you thinking of?" she said to me ; "it is time to resume our walk."

"I was thinking," I replied, "why God created you, and I was saying to myself that indeed it was to heal those who are suffering."

"That is an expression," she said, "which in your mouth can hardly be anything else than a compliment."

"Why?"

"Because to me you seem quite young."

"It sometimes happens," I said to her, "that one is older than he looks."

"Yes," she replied laughingly, "and it also happens that one is younger than he talks."

"Do you not believe in experience?"

"I know that it is the name most men give to their follies and to their sorrows; what can one know at your age?"

"Madame, a man of twenty may have lived more than a woman of thirty. The liberty that men enjoy leads them much more speedily to the bottom of all things; they run unshackled towards all that attracts them; they try everything. As soon as they hope, they set out on the march, they go, they hurry. Having attained their end, they turn back; hope has remained on the way, and happiness has failed to keep its promise."

As I spoke thus, we were at the top of a little hill that sloped down into the valley; Madame Pierson, as if invited by the rapid descent, took to jumping lightly. Without knowing why, I did as she was doing; we both began running without letting go of each other's arms;

the slippery grass drew us on. At last, like two stunned birds, while jumping and laughing, we found ourselves at the foot of the mountain.

"See," said Madame Pierson, "I was fatigued a moment ago ; now I am no longer so. And would you believe me?" she added, in a charming tone, "treat your experience somewhat as I treat my fatigue. We have run a good race, and we will sup with the better appetite on that account."

V

I went to see her next day. I found her at her piano, the old aunt embroidering at the window, her little room filled with flowers, the finest sunshine in the world coming through her Venetian blinds, and a large bird-cage alongside of her.

I expected to see in her almost a nun, at least one of those provincial women who know nothing of what is going on two leagues away, and who live in a certain circle outside of which they never go. I acknowledge that these secluded existences, that are, as it were, buried here and there in cities, under thousands of unknown roofs, have always had a terror for me like stagnant cisterns ; the air there seems to me not fit to live in ; in all that is forgotten on earth, there is a little of death.

Madame Pierson had the newspapers and new books on her table ; it is quite true that she scarcely touched them. Despite the simplicity of her surroundings, of her furniture, of her apparel, fashion, that is, novelty, life, was evident there ; she neither put it on nor concerned herself with it, but all that was manifest. What struck me in her tastes was that nothing was odd there, but only youthful and pleasant. Her conversation showed a finished education ; there was nothing of which she did not speak well and easily. Though one saw that she was artless, at the same time one felt that she was profound, richly gifted ; a vast and free understanding there hovered sweetly over a simple heart and over the habits of a retired life. The sea-swallow, which zigzags in the azure of the heavens, hovers thus from a cloudy height over the tuft of grass in which she has built her nest.

We talked literature, music, and touched on politics. She had gone in winter to Paris ; from time to time she glanced at the world ; what she saw of it served as a theme, and the rest was guessed at.

But what distinguished her above all was a pleasantness which, without amounting to delight, was unalterable ; one would have said that she was born a flower, and that its perfume was gayety.

With her paleness and her large black eyes, I cannot say how striking that was, without taking into account that, from time to time, at certain words, at certain looks, it was clear to be seen that she had suffered and

that life had not spared her. I do not know what it was in her that told you that the sweet serenity of her brow had not come from this world, but that she had received it from God and that she would give it back to Him faithfully, in spite of men, without losing anything of it; and there were moments when one recalled the housekeeper who, when the air is stirring, puts her hand in front of her candle.

As soon as I had spent a half-hour in her room, I could not help telling her all that I had in my heart. I thought of my past life, of my sorrows, of my weariness; I moved about, leaning over the flowers, breathing the air, looking at the sun. I begged her to sing, she did so with good grace. During that time I was resting against the window and I was looking at her birds hopping about. An expression of Montaigne's came into my head: "I neither love nor esteem sadness, though the world has undertaken, as if at a fixed price, to honor it with special favor. They clothe with it wisdom, virtue, conscience. Stupid and mean adornment."

"What happiness!" I exclaimed in spite of myself, "what rest! what joy! what forgetfulness!"

The good aunt raised her head and looked at me with an air of astonishment; Madame Pierson stopped short. I became as red as fire, feeling my folly, and I went and sat down without saying a word.

We went down to the garden. The white goat that I had seen the evening before was lying there on the

grass ; it came to her as soon as it saw her, and followed us familiarly.

At the first turn of the alley, a large young man, of pale countenance, enveloped in a sort of black cassock, suddenly appeared at the gate. He entered without knocking, and came to greet Madame Pierson ; it seemed to me that his countenance, which I already found of bad omen, became a little darkened on seeing me. He was a priest whom I had seen in the village, and whose name was Mercanson ; he came from Saint-Sulpice, and the pastor of the place was his relative.

He was, at the same time, stout and pallid, a fact that has always struck me unfavorably, and which, indeed, makes a bad impression : it is a counter-meaning, is that sickly health. Besides, he had a slow and jerky way of talking that betokened a pedant. His very walk, which was neither young nor easy, shocked me ; as for his look, one might say that he had none. I do not know what to think of a man whose eyes tell me nothing. Those are the signs by which I had judged Mercanson, and which, unfortunately, did not deceive me.

He sat down on a bench and began to speak of Paris, which he called the modern Babylon. He came from there, he knew everybody ; he went to Madame de B——'s, who was an angel ; he delivered sermons in her parlor, people listened to them on their knees.—The worst of the matter is that it was true.—One of his friends, whom he had brought there, had just been

expelled from college for having seduced a girl, which was terrible indeed, very sad. He paid a thousand compliments to Madame Pierson on the charitable habits that she had contracted in the country; he had learned of her benefactions, the attentions that she bestowed on the sick, even to watching over them in person. It was very noble, very real; he would not fail to speak of it at Saint-Sulpice. Did he not seem to say that he would not fail to speak of it to God?

Wearied by this harangue, so as not to shrug my shoulders at it, I had lain down on the grass, and I was playing with the goat. Mercanson lowered on me his dull and lifeless eye: "The famous Vergniaud," he said, "had that mania for sitting on the ground and playing with animals."

"It is a mania," I replied, "quite innocent, Monsieur l'Abbé. If people had only such, folks might get along all alone, without so many people wishing to meddle."

My reply did not please him; he knit his brow and spoke of something else. He was entrusted with a commission: his relative, the village pastor, had spoken to him of a poor devil who had not the wherewith to buy his bread. He lived at such a place; he had been there himself, he had interested himself in the case; he hoped that Madame Pierson ——

I looked at her during that time, and I waited for her to answer, as if the sound of her voice would have

cured me of that of this priest. She only made a profound bow, and he withdrew.

When he had left, our gayety returned. A suggestion was made that we should go to a greenhouse that was at the foot of the garden.

Madame Pierson treated her flowers as she did her birds and her peasants; everything had to be healthy around her, each must have its drop of water and its ray of sunshine, so that she might herself be as gay and happy as a good angel; and so nothing was better kept or more charming than her little greenhouse. When we had made the tour of it, "Monsieur de T——," she said to me, "that is my little world; you have seen all that I possess, and my domain ends here."

"Madame," I said to her, "let my father's name, which has gained for me the favor of entering here, permit me to return hither, and I will believe that happiness has not altogether forgotten me."

She extended her hand to me, and I touched it with respect, not daring to carry it to my lips.

Evening having come, I returned home, shut my door and went to bed. I had a small white house before my eyes; I saw myself going out after dinner, traversing the village and the promenade, and going to knock at the gate. "O my poor heart!" I exclaimed, "God be praised! you are still young, you may live, you may love!"

VI

I was one evening at Madame Pierson's. More than three months had passed, during which I had seen her almost every day; and of that time what shall I say to you, except that I saw her? "To be with people whom one loves," says La Bruyère, "that suffices; to dream, to speak to them, not to speak to them, to think of them, to think of the most indifferent things, but near them, it is all the same."

I loved. During the past three months we had taken long walks together; I was initiated in the mysteries of her modest charity; we traversed the dark alleys, she on a small horse, I on foot, a stick in my hand; thus, half story-telling, half dreaming, we went to knock at the cabins. There was a little bench at the entrance to the wood where I went to wait for her after dinner. We found each other in this way as if by chance and regularly. In the morning, music, reading; in the evening, with the aunt, card parties by the fireside, as formerly with my father; and always, in every place, she near, she smiling, and her presence filling my heart. By what way, O Providence! have you led me to misfortune? what irrevocable destiny, then, was I charged to carry out? What! a life so free, an intimacy so

charming, so much rest, nascent hope! — O God! of what do men complain? what is there sweeter than to love?

To live, yes, to feel strongly, profoundly, that one exists, that one is a man, created by God, that is the first, the greatest benefit of love. Beyond a doubt, love is an inexplicable mystery. With whatever chains, with whatever mysteries, and I will even say with whatever disgusts the world has surrounded it, all buried as it is there under a mountain of prejudices which disfigure and deprave it, in all the filth through which one drags it, love, vivacious and fatal love, is none the less a celestial law as powerful and as incomprehensible as that which suspends the sun in the heavens. What, I ask you, is it but a bond stronger, more solid than iron, and which one can neither see nor touch? What is it to meet a woman, to look at her, to say a word to her and never more to forget her? Why that one rather than another? Invoke reason, habit, the senses, the head, the heart, and explain, if you can. You will find only two bodies, one there, the other here, and between them, what? air, space, immensity. O madmen who believe yourselves men and who dare to reason of love! do you possess it so as to speak of it? No, you have felt it. You have exchanged a look with an unknown being who was passing, and suddenly there has flown from you a something indescribable that has no name. You have taken root in earth, like the grain hidden in

the grass which feels that life is raising it, and that it is going to become a harvest.

We were alone, the window open, there was at the farther end of the garden a small fountain, the noise of which reached us. O God! I could count drop by drop all the water that has fallen in it whilst we were seated, whilst she was speaking and I was answering. It was there that I became intoxicated with her beyond all reason.

It is said that there is nothing so rapid as a feeling of antipathy; but I believe that one divines even more quickly that one is understood and that one is about to be loved. Of what value, then, are the slightest words! What matters it of what the lips speak, when one hears hearts respond?

What infinite sweetness in the first looks of a woman who attracts you! At first it seems as if all that they say in each other's presence is like timid essays, like slight trials; ere long is born a strange joy: one feels that one has sounded an echo; one is animated with a double life. What a touch! what an approach! And, when one is sure of being loved, when one has recognized in the cherished being, the fraternity that one looks for there, what serenity in the soul! Speech dies of its own accord; one knows in advance what one is going to say; souls reach out, lips are silent. Oh! what silence! what forgetfulness of everything!

Though my love, which had begun from the first day, had increased to excess, the respect that I had for

Madame Pierson had, however, closed my lips. If she had admitted me less easily to intimacy with her, I would perhaps have been more bold, for she had made so violent an impression on me that I never left her without transports of love. But, in her very frankness and in the confidence that she showed in me, there was something that stopped me ; besides, it was on my father's name that she had treated me as a friend. This consideration made me still more respectful towards her ; I was bound to show myself worthy of that name.

“To speak of love,” it is said, “is to make love.” We seldom spoke of it. Every time that it happened to me to touch on this subject casually, Madame Pierson scarcely replied and spoke of something else. I did not question for what reason, for it was not prudery ; but it seemed to me sometimes that her countenance assumed on those occasions a slight tinge of severity and even of suffering. As I had never put any question to her about her past life, and as I did not want to do so, I asked her about it no further.

On Sunday there was dancing in the village ; she nearly always went there. On those days her toilet, though always simple, was more elegant ; it was a flower in her hair, a brighter ribbon, the slightest trifle ; but there was in her whole person a more youthful, a more easy air. Dancing, which she liked very much on its own account, and avowedly, as an amusing exercise, inspired her with a playful gayety ; she had her station

under the small orchestra of the place ; she came there jumping, laughing with the country girls, who nearly all knew her. Once started, she did not check herself. Then it seemed to me that she spoke to me with more freedom than ordinarily ; there was, besides, an unwonted familiarity. I did not dance, being still in mourning ; but I remained behind her, and, seeing her so well disposed, I had felt more than once the temptation to confess to her that I loved her.

But I know not why, as soon as I thought of it, I felt in me an invincible fear ; this very idea of an avowal made me suddenly serious in the midst of the liveliest conversations. I had sometimes thought of writing to her, but I burned my letters as soon as I had half written them.

That evening I had dined at her house, I looked at all that tranquillity of her interior ; I thought of the quiet life that I was leading, of my happiness since I knew her, and I said to myself : “ Why more ? does not that suffice thee ? Who knows ? God has perhaps done no more for thee. If I told her that I love her, what would come of it ? she would perhaps forbid me to see her. Shall I, by telling it to her, make her more happy than she is to-day ? should I be more happy for it myself ? ”

I was leaning on the piano, and, as I was making these reflections, sadness took possession of me. Day was declining, she lit a candle ; on returning to sit

down, she saw that a tear had escaped from my eyes. "What is the matter with you?" she said. I turned away my head.

I was looking for an excuse and found none; I was afraid to meet her gaze. I arose and was at the window. The air was mild, the moon was rising behind the linden alley, that one where I had seen her for the first time. I fell into a deep reverie, I forgot her very presence, and, extending my arms towards heaven, a sob escaped from my heart.

She had arisen, and she was behind me. "What is it, then?" she again asked. I answered her that my father's death had been recalled to my thought at the sight of that vast solitary valley; I took leave of her and left.

Why I was determined to be silent as to my love, I could not explain to myself. Yet, instead of returning home, I began to wander like a madman in the village and in the wood. I sat down where I found a bench, then I arose hurriedly. About midnight I approached Madame Pierson's house; she was at the window. On seeing her, I felt myself tremble; I wanted to retrace my steps; I was as if fascinated; I came slowly and sadly to sit down below her.

I know not whether she recognized me; I was but a few moments there when I heard her, with her sweet and fresh voice, singing the refrain of a romance, and almost immediately a flower fell on my shoulder. It

was a rose which, that very evening, I had seen on her bosom ; I picked it up and carried it to my lips.

“ Who,” she said, “ is there at this hour ? is it you ? ” she called me by name.

The garden gate was open ; I arose without replying and entered it. I stopped in the middle of the lawn ; I walked like a somnambulist and without knowing what I was doing.

Suddenly I saw her appear at the stairway door ; she seemed uncertain and was looking attentively at the moon’s rays. She took a few steps towards me, I advanced. I could not speak ; I fell on my knees before her and took hold of her hand.

“ Listen to me,” she said, “ I know it ; but, if it has reached this point, Octave, we must part. You come here every day, are you not welcome ? is it not enough ? What can I do for you ? my friendship is yours : I would have liked that you had had the strength to keep yours for me longer.”

VII

Madame Pierson, after having spoken thus, kept silent, as if awaiting a reply. As I remained overwhelmed with sadness, she withdrew her hand gently, receded a few steps, stopped again, then returned slowly to her house.

I remained on the grass. I was musing upon what she had said to me; my resolve was taken at once, and I decided to leave. I arose with a distressed but firm heart, and I made a tour of the garden. I looked at the house, the window of her room; I pulled the gate on leaving, and, after having shut it, I touched the lock with my lips.

Having returned home, I told Larive to prepare what was necessary, as I counted on leaving as soon as day should break. The poor fellow was astonished at it, but I made him a sign to obey and not to question. He brought a large trunk and we began to arrange everything.

It was five o'clock in the morning, and day was beginning to appear when I asked myself whither I should go. At such an ordinary thought as this, which had not yet come to me, I felt in me an irresistible discouragement. I cast my eyes on the country, scanning the horizon here and there. A great weakness took possession of me; I was exhausted from fatigue. I sat down in an arm-chair; gradually my ideas became mixed; I raised my hand to my forehead, it was bathed in perspiration. A violent fever made all my members tremble; I had only strength enough to drag myself to my bed with Larive's aid. All my thoughts were so confused that I scarcely remembered what had happened. The day rolled by; towards evening I heard a noise of instruments. It was the Sunday ball, and I told

Larive to go and see if Madame Pierson was there. He did not find her there ; I sent him to her house. The windows were shut ; the servant told him that her mistress had left with her aunt, and that they were to spend some days with a relative who lived at N——, a small town a considerable distance off. At the same time he brought me a letter that had been given to him. It was couched in these terms :

“ It is three months since I have been seeing you, and one month since I noticed that you regarded me with what, at your age, people call love. I had thought I remarked in you the resolve to conceal it from me and to conquer yourself. I had esteem for you ; that added to it. I have no reproach to make to you for what has happened, nor for that which you lacked in will.

“ What you believe to be love is only desire. I know that many women seek to inspire it ; pride would be better placed in them, so to act that they would have no need of it to please those who approached them ; but this very vanity is dangerous, since I was wrong in having it with you.

“ I am older than you by several years, and I ask you not to see me any more. It would be in vain for you to try to forget a moment of weakness ; what has passed between us can neither happen a second time nor be forgotten altogether.

“I do not leave you without sorrow ; I shall be absent for some days ; if, on returning, I find you no longer in the country, I shall be sensitive to this last mark of friendship and esteem which you have shown to me.

“BRIGITTE PIERSON.”

VIII

The fever kept me a week in bed. As soon as I was in a condition to write, I answered Madame Pierson that she would be obeyed and that I was going to leave. I wrote to her in good faith and without any intention of deceiving her ; but I was very far from keeping my promise. Scarcely had I gone two leagues when I called out to stop and got out of the carriage. I took to walking on the road. I could not divert my looks from the village which I saw in the distance. At last, after a frightful irresolution, I felt that it was impossible for me to continue my journey, and, rather than get back into the carriage, I would have consented to die on the spot. I told the postilion to turn, and, instead of going to Paris, as I had announced, I made direct for N——, where Madame Pierson was.

I arrived there at ten o'clock in the evening. Scarcely had I alighted at the inn when I got a boy to point out to me her relative's house, and, without reflecting on

what I was doing, I betook myself thither on the spot. A servant-girl came to open the door to me ; I asked her if Madame Pierson was there, to go and tell her that some one wanted to speak to her on behalf of Monsieur Desprez. That was the name of our village pastor.

While the servant was carrying my message, I remained in a small and rather dark court ; as it was raining, I advanced to a peristyle at the foot of the stairway, which was not lighted. Madame Pierson soon arrived, perceiving the servant ; she came down quickly and did not see me in the darkness ; I took a step toward her and touched her arm. She drew back in affright and exclaimed : "What do you want of me ?"

The sound of her voice was so tremulous, and, when the servant appeared with her light, I saw she was so pale, that I knew not what to think. Was it possible that my unexpected presence had disturbed her to such a point ? This reflection passed through my mind, but I said to myself that it was no doubt an impulse of fright, natural to a woman who feels herself suddenly taken hold of.

Yet, in a calmer voice, she repeated her question. "You must," I said to her, "permit me to see you once more. I will leave, I am abandoning the country ; you will be obeyed, I swear to you, and beyond your wishes ; for I will sell my father's house, as well as everything else, and will go abroad. But it is only on condition that I shall see you once more ; if not, I stay ; fear nothing from me, but I am bent upon it."

She knit her brow and cast a strange look on one side and then on the other; then she answered me in an almost gracious way: "Come to-morrow in the day-time, I will receive you." Thereupon she left.

Next day, I went there at noon. I was ushered into a room with old tapestry and antique furniture. I found her alone, seated on a sofa. I sat down opposite to her.

"Madame," I said to her, "I come neither to speak to you of what I am suffering nor to renounce the love that I have for you. You have written to me that what had taken place between us could not be forgotten, and it is true. But you tell me that because of that we can no longer see each other on the same footing as formerly, and you are mistaken. I love you, but I have not offended you; nothing is changed so far as regards you, since you do not love me. If I see you again, it is, then, only for me that one must answer to you, and what answers for me to you is precisely my love."

She wanted to interrupt me.

"Permit me, as a favor, to finish. No one knows better than I that, notwithstanding all the respect that I bear you and despite all the protestations by which I might bind myself, love is the strongest. I repeat to you that I do not come to give up what I have in my heart. But it is not since to-day, according to what you tell me yourself, that you have known that I love you. What reason, then, has kept me until now from declaring it to you? The fear of losing you; I was afraid of being no

longer received at your house, and that is what happens. Impose on me, as a condition, that at the first word that I shall speak of it, on the first occasion on which a sign shall escape me or a thought that deviates from the most profound respect, your door shall be shut against me; as I have been silent heretofore, I will be silent in the future. You believe that it is for a month past that I have loved you, but it is from the first day. When you took notice of it, you did not therefore cease to see me. If you had then for me enough esteem to believe me incapable of offending you, why should I have lost that esteem? that it is which I come to ask of you again. What have I done to you? I have bent the knee; I have not even said a word. What have I taught you? you know it already. I was weak because I was suffering. Well, madame, I am twenty, and what I have seen of life has made me so disgusted with it—I might use a stronger word—that there is not to-day on earth, neither in the society of men, nor in solitude itself, a place so small and so insignificant that I would deign to occupy it. The space contained between the four walls of your garden is the only place in the world where I live; you are the only human being who would make me love God. I had given up everything even before knowing you; why take from me the only ray of sunshine that Providence has left to me? If it is from fear, in what have I been able to inspire you with it? If it is from pity, of what have I made myself guilty? If it is

from pity and because I suffer, you are wrong in believing that I can be cured; I could have been, perhaps, two months ago; I have preferred to see you and to suffer, and do not repent of it, whatever may happen. The only misfortune that can affect me is to lose you. Put me on trial. If ever I come to feel that there is for me too much suffering in our bargain, I will leave; that you may be quite sure of, since, as you send me away to-day, I am ready to go. What risk do you run in giving me a month or two more of the only happiness that I shall ever have?"

I awaited her reply. She rose brusquely, then sat down again. She was silent for a moment. "Be persuaded of it," she said, "that is not so." I believed I noticed that she was seeking expressions that would not seem too severe and that she wanted to answer me tenderly.

"A word," I said to her as I rose, "a word, and nothing more. I know who you are, and, if there be any compassion for me in your heart, I thank you; speak one word! this moment decides my life."

She shook her head; I saw her hesitate. "You think that I will get cured of it?" I exclaimed. "May God leave you this thought, if you drive me from here ——"

While saying these words I was looking at the horizon, and I felt to the very bottom of my soul a solitude so horrible at the idea that I was going to leave, that my blood froze. She saw me standing, my eyes fixed on

her, waiting for her to speak ; all the strength of my life was suspended on her lips.

“ Well,” she said, “ listen to me. This journey that you have made is an act of imprudence ; it must not be on my account that you have come here ; charge yourself with a commission that I will give you to a friend of my family. If you find that it is somewhat far off, let it be to you the occasion of an absence which will last as long as you wish, but which will not be too short. Whatever you say of it,” she added, smiling, “ a little journey will calm you. You will stay in the Vosges, and you will go as far as Strasburg. In a month, or two months, better, return to give me an account of what you will be charged with ; I will see you again and will better answer you.”

IX

I received that very evening, on the part of Madame Pierson, a letter addressed to M. R. D., at Strasburg. Three weeks later, my commission was attended to and I had returned.

I had thought only of her during my journey, and I lost all hope of ever forgetting her. Yet my course was taken to keep silent in her presence ; the danger that I had incurred of losing her by the imprudence that I had

committed had made me suffer too cruelly for me to bear the idea of exposing myself to it anew. The esteem that I had for her did not allow me to believe that she was not sincere, and, in the step that she had taken in leaving the country, I saw nothing that resembled hypocrisy. In a word, I was firmly persuaded that on the first expression of love that I should make to her, her door would be closed against me.

I found her again thinner and changed. Her habitual smile seemed languishing on her colorless lips. She told me that she had been suffering.

There was no question of what had happened. She had the air of not wanting to remember it, and I did not care to speak of it. We soon resumed our former habit of neighborhood; yet there was between us a certain restraint and, as it were, a formal familiarity. It seemed that we said sometimes: "It was thus of old, let it then be so still." She gave me her confidence like a rehabilitation that was not without charm to me. But our conversations were colder, for this very reason that our looks had, whilst we were speaking, been carrying on a tacit conversation. In all that we could say there was nothing more to be guessed at. We no longer sought, as of old, to penetrate into each other's minds; there was no longer that interest in each word, in each sentiment, that curious esteem of former days; she treated me kindly, but I distrusted her very kindness; I walked with her in the garden, but I no

longer accompanied her away from home ; we no longer traversed the woods and the valleys together ; she opened the piano when we were alone ; the sound of her voice no longer awakened in my heart those outbursts of youth, those transports of joy that are, as it were, sobs full of hope. When I left she always extended her hand, but I felt it inanimate ; there was much effort in our ease, many reflections in our slightest chats, much sadness at the bottom of all that.

We felt indeed that there was a third presence with us : it was the love that I had for her. Nothing in my actions betrayed it, but ere long it appeared on my countenance : I lost my gayety, my strength, and the appearance of health that I had on my cheeks. A month had not elapsed when I no longer looked like myself.

Yet, in our conversations, I always insisted on my disgust for the world, on the aversion that I felt to again re-enter it. I took it on me as a task to make Madame Pierson feel that she must not reproach herself for having received me anew. Sometimes I pictured to her my past life in the darkest colors, and gave her to understand that, if it was necessary for me to separate from her, I would remain devoted to a solitude worse than death : I told her that I had a horror of society, and the faithful story of my life, which I had given her, proved to her that I was sincere. Sometimes I affected a gayety that was very far from my heart, in order to

say to her that in allowing me to see her, she had saved me from the most frightful misfortune ; I thanked her on nearly every occasion that I went to her house, so as to be able to return there in the evening or next day. "All my dreams of happiness," I said to her, "all my hopes, all my ambition, are contained in that little corner of earth in which you dwell ; outside the air that you breathe, there is no life for me."

She saw what I was suffering and could not help pitying me. My courage excited her sympathy, and a sort of tenderness entered into all her words, into her very actions and her attitude, when I was there. She felt the struggle that was taking place in me : my obedience flattered her pride, but in her my paleness awoke her instinct of a Sister of Charity. I saw her sometimes irritated, almost coquettish ; she said to me in an almost mutinous tone : "I shall not be here to-morrow, do not come on such a day." Then, as I was retiring, sad and resigned, she suddenly softened ; she added : "I know nothing of it, come always ;" or indeed her adieu was more familiar, she followed me as far as the gate with a sadder and sweeter look.

"Have no doubt of it," I said to her, "it is Providence that has brought me to you. If I had not known you, perhaps, at the present hour, I would have fallen back into my excesses. God has sent you, as an angel of light, to rescue me from the abyss. It is a holy mission that has been confided to you ; who knows, if

I lost you, whither I might be drawn by the sorrow that would devour me, the fatal experience that I have at my age, and the terrible combat of my youth with my weariness?"

This thought, quite sincere in me, was of the greatest force on a woman of an exalted devotion and of a soul as pious as it was ardent. It was perhaps for this sole cause that Madame Pierson allowed me to see her.

I was making arrangements one day to go to her house, when some one knocked at my door, and I saw Mercanson enter, that same priest whom I had met in her garden on my first visit. He began with excuses as tiresome as himself, on his presenting himself thus at my house without knowing me; I told him that I knew him very well as our pastor's nephew and asked him the object of his visit.

He turned from one side to the other with an embarrassed air, picking his phrases and touching with his finger ends everything that was on my table, like a man who knows not what to say. At last he told me that Madame Pierson was ill and that she had charged him to notify me that she could not see me again during the day.

"She is ill? But I left her yesterday rather late, and she was very well!"

He made a bow. "But, Monsieur l'Abbé, why, if she is ill, send me word of it by a third party? She does not live so far away, and it was of little importance letting me make a useless journey."

The same reply on the part of Mercanson. I could not understand this step on his part, still less this commission with which he had been entrusted. "All right," I said to him, "I will see her to-morrow, and she will explain all that to me."

His hesitancy began again: "Madame Pierson had told him besides — he was to tell me — he had undertaken —"

"Well! what, then?" I exclaimed impatiently.

"Monsieur, you are violent. I think that Madame Pierson is rather seriously ill; she will not be able to see you for the whole week."

Another bow; and he left.

It was clear that this visit concealed some mystery: either Madame Pierson no longer wished to see me, for what reason I know not, or Mercanson interfered of his own motion.

I allowed the day to pass; next day, early, I was at the door, where I met the servant; but she told me that indeed her mistress was very ill, and, whatever I could do, she wanted neither to take the money that I offered her nor to listen to my questions.

As I was re-entering the village, I saw Mercanson himself on the promenade; he was surrounded by the school children, to whom his uncle was giving a lesson. I approached him while he was in the midst of his harangue and entreated him to speak a couple of words to me.

He followed me to the square ; but it was my turn to hesitate, for I knew not how to get at him so as to draw his secret from him. "Sir," I said to him, "I entreat you to tell me if what you told me yesterday is the truth or if there be some other reason for it. Besides, there being in the district no doctor who can be called upon, I have reasons of great importance for asking you what is the matter."

He defended himself in every form and fashion, pretending that Madame Pierson was ill, and that he knew nothing more, except that she had sent him to find me and charged him to notify me in the manner he had. While talking, however, we had reached the head of the main street, at a lonely place. Seeing that neither ruse nor entreaty was of any avail to me, I suddenly turned around and took hold of him by both arms.

"What is this, monsieur? do you mean to use violence?"

"No, but I mean you to speak to me."

"Monsieur, I am afraid of no one, and I have told you what I had to say."

"You have said what you had to say and not what you know. Madame Pierson is not ill ; I know it, I am sure of it."

"What do you know of it?"

"The servant has told me so. Why does she shut her door against me, and why does she communicate through you?"

Mercanson saw a peasant passing. "Pierre," he called to him by his name, "listen to me, I have something to say to you."

The peasant approached us; that was all that he asked, thinking indeed that before a third party I should not dare to maltreat him. I released him indeed, but so rudely that he recoiled from it, and his back struck against a tree. He clenched his fist and left without saying a word.

I spent the whole week in extreme agitation, going three times a day to Madame Pierson's, and being constantly refused at her door. I received a letter from her; she told me that my assiduity had occasioned tattling in the whole country and entreated me to make my visits rarer thereafter. Not a word, moreover, of Mercanson or of her malady.

This precaution was so far from natural to her and contrasted in such a strange manner with the proud indifference that she showed to every sort of talk of this kind, that I at first found it difficult to believe in it. Not knowing, however, what other interpretation to put on it, I answered her that I had nothing so much at heart as to obey her. But, in spite of myself, the expressions which I made use of smacked somewhat of bitterness.

I even voluntarily delayed the day on which I was allowed to go and see her and I did not send to ask news of her, in order to convince her that I did not

believe in her malady. I did not know for what reason she thus kept me away ; but I was, in truth, so unhappy that I sometimes thought seriously of putting an end to this unendurable life. I remained whole days in the woods ; chance made her meet me there one day, in a pitiable state.

It was with difficulty that I had the courage to ask her for some explanations ; she did not answer frankly, and I did not again return to that subject. I was reduced to counting the days that I spent far from her and to living for weeks on the hope of a visit. At every moment I felt the desire to cast myself at her knees and to picture my despair to her. I said to myself that she could not be insensible to it, that she would pay me at least with some words of pity ; but, thereupon, the memory of her brusque departure and her severity returned to me ; I trembled at losing her, and I preferred to die rather than expose myself to that.

Thus, not having even permission to acknowledge my suffering, my health at last gave way. My feet carried me to her house only painfully : I felt that I was going there to draw from the fountain of tears, and each visit cost me new ones ; each time that I left her, I felt my heart tortured as if I were never to see her again.

On her part, she no longer spoke to me in the same tone or with the same ease as before ; she spoke of plans for traveling ; she affected to confide in me, to some little extent, as to the desires that possessed her, she said,

of leaving the country, which made me more dead than alive when I heard them. If she gave herself up for an instant to a natural impulse, she fell back at once into a despairing coldness. I could not help one day weeping from grief in her presence at the manner in which she was treating me. I saw her grow pale on this account in spite of herself. As I was leaving, she said to me at the door: "I am going to-morrow to Saint-Luce,"—it was a village in the neighborhood,—"and it is too far to go on foot. Be here on horseback in the early morning, if you have nothing to do: you will accompany me."

I was punctual at the meeting-place, as one may imagine. I had gone to bed on these words with transports of joy; but, on leaving my house, I felt, on the contrary, an invincible sadness. By giving back to me the privilege that I had lost, of accompanying her on her solitary journeys, she had clearly given way to a fancy that to me seemed cruel, if she did not love me. She knew that I was suffering; why abuse my courage if she had not changed her mind?

This reflection, which I made in spite of myself, created in me an unusual humor. When she was mounting on horseback, my heart beat when I took hold of her foot; I do not know whether it was desire or anger. "If she is touched," I said to myself, "why so much reserve? if she is only coquettish, why so much liberty?"

Such are men. At my first word, she noticed that I was looking away and that my countenance was

changed. I did not speak to her and I took the other side of the road. As long as we were in the plain, she appeared tranquil and only turned her head from time to time to see if I was following her ; but, when we entered the forest and when our horses' hoofs began to resound under the dark alleys, among the solitary rocks, I saw her suddenly tremble. She stopped as if to wait for me, for I kept a little behind her ; as soon as I rejoined her, she started at a gallop. Ere long we reached the mountain slope, and it was necessary to walk. I came then and placed myself beside her ; but both of us bowed our heads ; it was time, I took hold of her hand.

“ Brigitte,” I said to her, “ have I tired you with my complaints? Since I have returned, since I have seen you every day and every evening, on going home, I ask myself, at the cost of my life, have I importuned you? For two months past that I have been losing rest, strength, and hope, have I said to you a word of this fatal love that is devouring me and that is killing me, do you not know it? Raise your head ; is it necessary to tell you so? Do you not see that I am suffering and that my nights are spent in weeping? have you not met somewhere in these gloomy forests an unfortunate man seated with both his hands on his brow? have you never found tears on those heaths? Look at me, look at those mountains ; do you remember that I love you? They know it, they, those witnesses ; those rocks, those deserts know it. Why bring me into their presence? am I not

wretched enough? have I now failed of courage? are you sufficiently obeyed? To what trial, to what torture am I subjected, and for what crime? If you do not love me, what are you doing here?"

"Let us go," she said, "take me back, let us retrace our steps." I seized her horse's bridle.

"No," I replied, "for I have spoken. If we return, I lose you, I know it; on reaching your home, I know in advance what you will tell me. You have wanted to see how far my patience went, you have set my sorrow at defiance, perhaps to have the right of driving me away; you were tired of this sorry lover who was suffering without complaining and who with resignation was drinking the bitter chalice of your disdain! you knew that, alone with you, at the sight of these woods, in the face of these solitudes where my love began, I could not keep silent! you have wanted to be offended: well, madame, let me lose you! I have wept enough, I have suffered enough, I have quite sufficiently driven back into my heart the mad love that is gnawing me; you have been cruel enough!"

As she made a motion to jump down from her horse, I took her in my arms and pressed my lips to hers. But, at the same moment, I saw her grow pale, her eyes were closed, she loosed the bridle that she was holding and slipped to the ground.

"God of goodness!" I exclaimed, "she loves me!" She had returned my kiss.

I leaped to the ground and ran to her. She was stretched on the grass. I raised her up, she opened her eyes; a sudden terror made her shudder all over; she forcibly repelled my hand, burst into tears and escaped from me.

I had remained on the roadside; I was looking at her, beautiful as the day, leaning against a tree, her long hair falling over her shoulders, her hands agitated and trembling, her cheeks covered with blushes, with the brilliancy of purple and pearls. "Do not approach me!" she exclaimed, "do not take a step towards me!"

"Oh, my love!" I said to her, "fear nothing, if I offended you a moment ago, you can punish me for it; I have had a moment's madness and pain; treat me as you will, you can go now, so send me whither it will please you! I know that you love me, Brigitte; you are more secure here than all the kings in their palaces."

Madame Pierson, at these words, fixed her humid eyes on me; I saw therein the happiness of my life coming to me in a glance. I crossed the road and went to cast myself on my knees before her. How little he loves who can say what words his mistress used to acknowledge to him that she loved him!

X

If I were a jeweler, and if I took from my treasure a pearl necklace to make a present of it to a friend, it seems to me that it would give me great joy to place it myself around her neck ; but, if I were the friend, I would die rather than snatch the collar from the jeweler's hands.

I have seen that most men are eager to take to themselves the woman who loves them ; and I have always done the contrary, not from calculation, but from a natural feeling. The woman who loves a little and who resists, does not love enough, and she who loves enough and who resists, knows that she is loved less.

Madame Pierson showed me more confidence, after having acknowledged to me that she loved me, than she had ever shown. The respect that I had for her inspired in her so sweet a joy that her beautiful countenance thereby became, as it were, a flower in full bloom ; I saw her sometimes give herself up to a giddy gayety, then suddenly stop pensive, affecting, at certain moments, to treat me almost as a child, then looking at me with her eyes full of tears ; imagining a thousand pleasantries to find a pretext for a more familiar word or for an innocent caress, then leaving me to sit apart and to give herself up to reveries that took hold of her.

Is there in the world a sweeter spectacle? When she returned to me, she found me on her way, in some alley from which I had watched her from afar. "O my love!" I said to her, "God, Himself, rejoices at seeing how much you are loved."

I could not, however, conceal from her either the violence of my desires or what I was suffering through struggling against them. One evening, when I was at her house, I told her that I had learned in the morning of the loss of a lawsuit important to me and that brought a considerable change into my affairs. "How does that happen," she asked me, "that you tell me of it laughing?"

"There is," I said to her, "a maxim of a Persian poet: 'He who is loved by a beautiful woman is sheltered from the blows of fate!'"

Madame Pierson did not answer me; she showed herself during the whole evening still more gay than usual. As I was playing cards with her aunt and was losing, there was no sort of mischief that she did not use to pique me, saying that I understood nothing about it and always betting against me, so much so that she won from me all that I had in my purse. When the old lady had retired, she went out on the balcony, and I followed her thither in silence.

It was one of the finest nights imaginable: the moon was setting and the stars were shining with the more sparkling brightness in a sky of deep azure. Not a

breath of wind was stirring the trees; the air was warm and balmy.

She was leaning on her elbow, her eyes towards the heavens; I had reclined beside her and was looking at her dreaming. Ere long I raised my eyes, too; a melancholy lust was intoxicating both of us. We breathed together the tepid whiffs that came from the hedgerows; we followed afar off in space the last glimmers of a pale whiteness which the moon was drawing with her as she went down behind the black masses of the chestnut-trees. I remembered a certain day that I had looked with despair on the immense void of that beautiful sky; that memory made me bound; everything was so full now! I felt that a hymn of thanks was rising in my heart and that our love was mounting to God. I drew my arm around the waist of my dear mistress; she turned her head gently: her eyes were bathed in tears. Her body bent like a reed, her parted lips fell on mine, and the universe was forgotten.

XI

Eternal angel of happy nights, who will relate thy silence? O kiss! mysterious draught which the lips distill as from blended cups! intoxication of the senses, O Passion! yes, like God, thou art immortal! sublime

transports of the creature, universal communion of beings, Passion thrice holy, what have they said of thee who have vaunted thee? they have called thee fleeting, O creatrix! and they have said that thy brief appearance illuminated their fugitive life. A word itself more brief than the breath of a dying man! a true word of a sensual brute, who is astonished at living an hour, and takes the glimmers of the eternal lamp for a spark that flashes from a pebble! Love, O principle of the world! a precious flame that entire nature, like an anxious vestal, watches over incessantly in the temple of God! focus of everything, by which everything exists! the spirits of destruction would themselves die by breathing on thee! I am not astonished that people blaspheme thy name; for they know not what thou art, those who believe they have seen thee face to face because they have opened their eyes; when thou findest thy true apostles, united on earth in a kiss, thou orderest their pupils to close like veils, that people may not see the happiness.

But you, delights, languishing smiles, first caresses, timid familiarities; first stammerings of the lover, you that one can see, you that are ours! are you, then, less God's than the rest, beautiful cherubs who hover in the alcove and who bring back to this world man awakened from the divine dream! Ah! dear children of Passion, how your mother loves you! It is you, wondering chats that quicken the first mysteries, ever trembling

and chaste touches, looks already insatiable, that begin to trace in the heart, as it were, a timid rough draught, the ineffaceable image of cherished beauty ! O kingdom ! O conquest ! it is you that make lovers. And you, true diadem, you, serenity of happiness ! first look directed on life, first return of bliss to so many indifferent objects, which they no longer see but through their joy, first steps taken in nature by the side of the well-beloved ! who will paint you ? what human speech will ever express the feeblest caress ?

He who, on a fresh morning, in the fullness of youth, has gone out with slow strides, whilst the adored hand shut the secret door on him ; who has wandered without knowing whither, looking at the woods and the plains ; who has traversed a place without hearing any one speak to him ; who has sat down in a solitary place, laughing and weeping without reason ; who has laid his hands on his face to breathe a lingering trace of perfume ; who has suddenly forgotten what he had done on earth until then ; who has spoken to the trees on the roadside and to the birds that he saw pass ; who, in fine, in the midst of men, has shown himself a gleeful madman, then who has fallen on his knees and who has thanked God for it ; that man will die without complaining :— he has possessed the woman he loved.

PART FOUR

PART FOURTH

I

I have now to relate what came of my love and the change that took place in me. What reason can I give for it? None, except that I relate and that I can say: "It is the truth."

It was two days, neither more nor less, since I was Madame Pierson's lover. I left the bath at eleven o'clock in the evening, and on a magnificent night I traversed the promenade to betake myself to her house. I felt so well in body and so content in soul that I jumped with joy as I walked and stretched my arms towards heaven. I found her at the top of her staircase, her elbows on the balustrade, a candle on the floor beside her. She was waiting for me, and, as soon as she saw me, ran to

meet me. We were soon in her room, and the bolts fastened on us.

She showed me how she had changed the dressing of her hair, which displeased me, and how she had spent the day in giving to it the turn that I liked ; how she had taken from the alcove a large, mean, black frame that seemed to be of ill omen ; how she had renewed her flowers, and there were some on every side ; she told me all that she had done since we knew each other, what she had seen me suffer, what she herself had suffered ; how she had wanted a thousand times to leave the country and fly from her love ; how she had invented so many precautions against me ; that she had taken advice from her aunt, from Mercanson, and from the pastor ; that she had sworn to herself to die rather than yield, and how all that had flown at a certain word that I had said to her, at a particular look, at a particular circumstance ; and at each confidence a kiss. What I found to my taste in her room, what had attracted my attention among the trifles with which her tables were covered, she wanted to give me, to take them away that very evening and to put them on my mantel-piece ; what she would do thereafter, morning, evening, at every hour, for me to regulate at my pleasure, and for her to be concerned about nothing ; that the talk of the world did not touch her ; that, if she had made a feint of believing in it, it was to keep me at a distance ; but that she wanted to be happy and to stop up both her ears ;

that she was just thirty, that she had not long to be loved by me. "And you, will you love me long? Are they in the least true, those beautiful words with which you have made me so very blithe?" And thereupon the dear reproaches that I came late and that I was coquettish; that I had perfumed myself too much in the bath, or not enough, or not to her liking; that she had remained in slippers so that I might see her bare foot, and that it was as white as her hand; but that, moreover, she was scarcely beautiful; that she would like to be a hundred times more so; that she had been so at fifteen. She went to and fro, quite silly from love, quite roseate with joy; and she knew not what to imagine, what to do, what to say, to give herself and to give herself again, body and soul, and all that she had.

I was lying on the sofa; I felt falling and being detached from me an evil hour of my past life, at each word that she spoke. I was looking at the star of love rise over my field, and it seemed to me that I was, as it were, a tree full of sap, that is throwing off to the wind its dry leaves so as to clothe itself with a new verdure.

She sat at the piano, and told me that she was going to play for me an air by Stradella. I like sacred music above all, and this piece, which she had already sung for me, had to me seemed very beautiful. "Well," she said when she had finished, "you are very much deceived in it; the air is mine, and I have imposed upon you."

"It is by you?"

“Yes, and I have told you that it was by Stradella to see what you would say of it. I never play my own music, when it happens to me to compose any ; but I have wanted to make an attempt, and you see that I have succeeded, since you were its dupe.”

What a monstrous machine is man ! What was there more innocent ? A half-instructed child might have imagined this trick to surprise her preceptor. She laughed at it heartily as she told me of it ; but I felt, all of a sudden, as if a cloud had come over me ; I changed countenance : “What ails you ?” she said, “what overcomes you ?”

“Nothing ; play that air for me once more.”

While she was playing, I was walking backwards and forwards ; I passed my hand over my brow as if to remove a dampness from it, I stamped my foot, I shrugged my shoulders at my own folly ; at last, I sat down on the floor on a cushion that had fallen ; she came to me. The more I wanted to struggle with the spirit of darkness that was laying hold of me at that moment, the more did the darkness eclipse my mind. “Truly,” I said to her, “you lie so well ? What ! that air is by you ? you know, then, how to lie so easily ?”

She looked at me with an air of astonishment. “What is it, then ?” she said. An inexpressible restlessness was pictured on her features. Assuredly she could not believe that I was fool enough to make so simple a pleasantry a veritable reproach to her ; she saw

nothing serious in that but the sadness that took possession of me ; but the more frivolous its cause was, the more there was in it to be surprised at. She wanted to believe for an instant that I was joking, in my turn ; but when she saw me ever grow paler and, as it were, ready to faint, she stood with her lips parted, her body inclined, like a statue. "God of heaven !" she exclaimed, "is it possible ?"

You, reader, perhaps smile on perusing this page ; as for me who write it, I still shudder at it. Misfortunes, as well as maladies, have their symptoms, and there is nothing so much dreaded at sea as a little black speck on the horizon.

When day dawned, however, my dear Brigitte drew into the middle of the room a small round table of white wood ; she placed on it the wherewith to have supper, or rather the necessaries for breakfast, for the birds were already singing and the bees humming on the lawn. She had prepared everything herself, and I drank not a drop without her carrying the glass to her lips. The bluish light of day, piercing the striped cotton curtains, lit up her charming countenance and her large, somewhat drooping eyes ; she felt a desire to sleep, and, while embracing me, let her head fall on my shoulders, with a thousand languishing remarks.

I could not struggle against so charming an abandonment, and my heart was reopened to joy ; I believed myself entirely freed from the bad dream that I had

just had, and I asked her pardon for a moment's folly, for which I was unable to account. "My love," I said to her from the bottom of my heart, "I am very unhappy for having made you an unjust reproach about an innocent jest; but, if you love me, never lie to me, even concerning the slightest things: lying seems horrible to me, and I cannot bear it."

She lay down: it was three o'clock in the morning, and I told her that I wanted to remain until she was asleep. I saw her shut her beautiful eyes, I heard her in her first slumber murmur while smiling, and at the same time, leaning on the pillow, I gave her my farewell kiss. At last I left with my heart at peace, promising to enjoy my happiness without anything thereafter being able to disturb it.

But the very next day Brigitte said to me as if by chance: "I have a big book in which I write my thoughts, all that passes through my head, and I want to let you read what I have written in it of you during the first days that I saw you."

We read together what regarded me, and we added a hundred silly things to it; after which I set to turning over the leaves of the book in an indifferent manner. A phrase, inscribed in large characters, struck my gaze in the middle of the pages that I was turning over rapidly; I read distinctly some words that were rather insignificant, and I was going to continue when Brigitte said to me: "Do not read that."

I threw the book on a piece of furniture. "It is true," I said to her, "I do not know what I am doing."

"Do you still take it seriously?" she answered, laughing, no doubt seeing my trouble reappearing; "take back that book; I want you to read it."

"Let us say no more of it. What, then, can I find in it so curious? Your secrets are your own, my dear."

The book remained on the piece of furniture, and no matter how I tried I could not take my eyes from it. I suddenly heard, as it were, a voice that was whispering in my ear, and I believed I saw grimacing before me, with his glacial smile, the dry figure of Desgenais. "What does Desgenais come to do here?" I asked myself, as if I had really seen him. He had appeared to me such as he was one evening, his brow inclined under my lamp, when, in his sharp voice, he was laying down his libertine catechism to me.

I had my eyes still on the book, and I was feeling vaguely in my memory some forgotten words heard of old, but which had pressed on my heart. The spirit of doubt, suspended over my head, had just poured a drop of poison into my veins; its vapor was mounting to my brain, and I was half staggering in the beginning of a baneful intoxication. What secret was Brigitte concealing from me? I well knew that I had only to stoop and open the book; but at what place? how recognize the leaf to which chance had directed me?

My pride, moreover, would not have me take up the book; was it, then, really my pride? "O God!" I said with frightful sadness, "is it that the past is a spectre? is it emerging from its tomb? Ah! wretched one, is it that I am going to be unable to love?"

All my ideas of contempt for women, all those phrases of mocking fatuity that I had repeated like a lesson and like a part during the days of my excesses, suddenly passed through my mind; and, what a strange thing! whilst of old I did not believe in them while parading them, it seemed to me now that they were real, or that at least they had been so.

I was acquainted with Madame Pierson for four months past, but I knew nothing of her past life and had asked her nothing about it. I had given myself up to my love for her with unbounded confidence and ardor. I had found a sort of enjoyment in putting no question about her to any one or to herself: moreover, suspicions and jealousy count for so little in my character that I was more astonished at feeling them than was Brigitte at finding them in me. Never, either in my first loves or in the habitual commerce of life, had I been distrustful, but rather, on the contrary, bold, and, so to say, not doubting anything. It must have been that I saw with my own eyes my mistress's treason, to believe that she could deceive me. Desgenais himself, while sermonizing to me in his own way, was continually teasing me about my facility in letting myself be

duped. The history of my whole life was a proof that I was credulous rather than suspicious; and so, when the sight of that book thus struck me all of a sudden, it seemed to me that I felt in me a new being and a sort of unknown one; my reason revolted against what I was feeling, and I dared not ask myself whither all that was going to lead me.

But the sufferings that I had endured, the memory of the perfidies to which I had been a witness, the frightful cure that I had imposed upon myself, the speeches of my friends, the corrupted world through which I had passed, the sad truths that I had seen there, those which, without knowing them, I had understood and seen into by a fatal intelligence, in fine, debauch, contempt of love, abuse of everything, that was what I had in my heart without yet suspecting it; and, at the moment when I believed I was born again to hope and to life, all these benumbing furies took me by the throat and called out to me that they were there.

I stooped and opened the book, then I shut it immediately and threw it on the table. Brigitte looked at me; there was in her beautiful eyes neither wounded pride nor wrath; there was only tender restlessness, as if I had been ill. "Is it that you believe I have secrets?" she asked as she embraced me. "No," I said to her, "I believe nothing, except that you are beautiful and that I want to die loving you."

On returning home, as I was sitting down to dinner, I asked Larive: "What, then, is that Madame Pierson?"

He turned round quite astonished. "You," I said to him, "have been in the country for a number of years; you ought to know her better than I. What do people say of her here? what do they think of her in the village? what life did she lead before I knew her? what folks did she see?"

"Faith, monsieur, I have seen her do only what she is doing every day, that is, walking in the valley, playing piquet with her aunt, and bestowing charity on the poor. The peasants call her Brigitte la Rose; I have never heard a word spoken against her by any one whomsoever, except that she runs the fields all alone, at every hour of the day and of the night; but it is with so laudable a purpose! She is the Providence of the country. As for the people whom she sees, it is scarcely any one but the pastor, and Monsieur de Dalens during vacation."

"Who is Monsieur de Dalens?"

"He is the owner of a château that is down there behind the mountain; he comes here only for hunting."

"Is he young?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Is he related to Madame Pierson?"

"No; he was a friend of her husband."

"Is it long since her husband died?"

“Five years on All Saints’ Day ; he was a worthy man.”

“And do they say whether this Monsieur de Dalens has paid court to her?”

“To the widow, monsieur? marry! to say the truth ——” He stopped with an embarrassed air.

“Will you speak?”

“Some have said, and some have not said —— I know nothing of it, I have seen nothing of it.”

“And you told me a moment ago that people did not talk of her in the country?”

“People have never said anything further, and I thought that my master knew that.”

“Briefly, people say so, yes or no?”

“Yes, monsieur, I believe it at least.”

I rose from table and went down on the promenade; Mercanson was there. I expected that he was going to shun me; quite the contrary, he approached me.

“Monsieur,” he said to me, “the other day you showed me signs of wrath that a man of character should not keep in his memory. I express to you my regret at being entrusted with an untimely commission”—he made a habit of using long words—“and to have clogged the wheels with ever so little importunity.”

I paid him back his compliment, thinking that he would leave me thereupon; but he began to walk along beside me.

“Dalens! Dalens!” I repeated between my teeth, “who will speak to me of Dalens?” For Larive had

said nothing to me but what a valet might say. Through whom did he know him? through some servant-girl or some peasant. I must have a witness who could have seen Dalens at Madame Pierson's and who would know on what to depend. This Dalens never left my head, and, not being able to speak of anything else, I spoke of it at once to Mercanson.

Whether Mercanson was a wicked man, or was simple or tricky, I never clearly determined; it is certain that he ought to hate me, and that he behaved towards me as wickedly as possible. Madame Pierson, who had the greatest friendship for the pastor,—and it was for good reason,—had, almost in spite of herself, extruded that sentiment to the nephew. He was proud of it, consequently was jealous. It is love alone that produces jealousy; a favor, a kind word, a smile from a pretty mouth, may inspire it to madness in certain people.

Mercanson seemed at first astonished, as well as Larive, at the questions that I put to him. I was still more astonished at them myself. But who knows one's self here below?

At the priest's first answers I saw that he understood what I wanted to know, and decided not to tell me.

“How does it happen, monsieur, that you who have known Madame Pierson for a long time past, and are received at her house in a rather intimate way,—I think so at least,—have not met Monsieur de Dalens there?

But apparently you have some reason, which it is none of my business to know, to make inquiry about him to-day. What I can say of him for my part is that he was an honest gentleman, full of goodness and charity; he was, like you, monsieur, very intimate at Madame Pierson's; he has a considerable pack of hounds and does the honors of his house splendidly. He played very good music, like you, monsieur, at Madame Pierson's. As for his duties of charity, he performed them punctually; when he was in the country, he, like you, monsieur, accompanied this lady on the promenade. His family enjoys an excellent reputation in Paris; it happened to me to find him at this lady's house almost every time that I went there; his morals pass as being excellent. Moreover, understand, monsieur, that I mean to speak in every respect only of a proper familiarity, such as suits persons of their worth. I think that he comes only for hunting: he was her husband's friend; they say he is quite rich and very generous; but I scarcely know him, however, except by hearsay ——"

With how many tortuous phrases the heavy executioner was killing me! I looked at him, ashamed of listening to him, no longer daring to put a single question or to stop him in his gabble. He calumniated as sullenly and as long as he wanted: quite at his leisure, he drove his twisted blade into my heart; when this was done, he left me without my being able to keep him; and, taking all in all, he had told me nothing.

I remained alone on the promenade ; night was beginning to fall. I know not whether I felt more of fury or of sadness. This confidence, that I had had of giving myself up blindly to my love for my dear Brigitte, had been so sweet and so natural to me that I could not determine on believing that so much happiness had deceived me. That unaffected and credulous feeling which had led me to her without my wishing to fight against it or ever to doubt it, had seemed to me of itself alone a proof that she was worthy of it. Was it possible, then, that these four most happy months were already only a dream ?

“But, after all,” I said to myself of a sudden, “this woman has given herself rather quickly. Might there not have been some falsehood in that intention of flying from me which she at first had shown to me and which a word had dissipated ? Might I not perchance have had to do with a woman who was one of a large class ? Yes, it is thus that they all go about it : they feign to recede in order to see themselves followed. Hinds themselves do as much : it is an instinct of the female. Was it not of her own impulse that she acknowledged her love to me, at the very moment when I believed that she would never be mine ? On the first day that I had seen her, did she not accept my arm, without knowing me, with a levity that should have made me doubt her ? If this Dalens was her lover, it is probable that he is so still : there are those unions in the world that

neither begin nor end ; when they see each other they resume, and as soon as they leave each other they forget. If that man returns on a vacation, she will no doubt see him again, and probably without breaking with me. What is that aunt, what that mysterious life that has charity for a label, what that settled liberty which cares for no talk ? Might they not be adventurers, those two women with their little house, their probity and their wisdom which impose on people so quickly and are still more quickly belied ? Assuredly, however this may be, I have fallen with my eyes shut into an affair of gallantry that I have taken for a romance ; but what is to be done now ? I see no one here but that priest who does not want to talk plainly, or his uncle, who will say still less about it. O my God ! who will save me ? how know the truth ? ”

Thus spoke jealousy ; thus, forgetting so many tears and all that I had suffered, I came, after two days, to disturb myself about what Brigitte had yielded to me. Thus, like all those who doubt, I already put aside feelings and thoughts to dispute with facts, to stick to the letter and to dissect what I loved.

While burying myself in my reflections, by slow steps I reached Brigitte’s house. I found the gate open, and, as I was crossing the courtyard, I saw a light in the kitchen. I thought of questioning the servant. I turned, then, in that direction, and, jingling some silver pieces in my pocket, I stepped upon the threshold.

An impression of horror stopped me short. That servant was a lean and wrinkled old woman, her back always bent, like people attached to the soil. I found her washing her plates and dishes over an unclean sink. A disgusting candle was flickering in her hand ; around her, saucepans, dishes, remains of the dinner that a prowling dog was visiting, who like me, had entered shyly ; a warm and nauseating odor came from the humid walls. When the old woman perceived me, she looked at me, smiling with a confidential air : she had seen me in the morning slip out of her mistress's room. I shuddered from disgust with myself and with what I had come in search of, in a place so well adapted to the ignoble action that I was meditating. I fled from that old woman as well as from my personified jealousy, and as if the odor of her plates and dishes had come out of my own heart.

Brigitte was at the window, watering her dearly-beloved flowers ; a child of one of our neighbors, sitting in the bottom of the couch and buried in the cushions, was huddled up in one of its sleeves, and, its mouth full of bonbons, in its joyous and incomprehensible language, was making to her one of the long infant speeches, of those who do not yet know how to talk. I sat down beside her, and kissed the child's fat cheeks, as if to restore a little innocence to my heart. Brigitte gave me a timid reception ; she saw her image already disturbed in my looks. On my part, I shunned her

eyes; the more I admired her beauty and her air of candor, the more I said to myself that such a woman, if she was not an angel, was a monster of perfidy. I strove to recall each of Mercanson's words, and, so to say, I confronted that man's insinuations with my mistress's traits and the charming contours of her countenance. "She is very pretty," I said to myself, "quite dangerous, if she knows how to deceive; but I will break her in and keep ahead of her; and she will know who I am."

"My dear," I said to her, after a long silence, "I have just given advice to a friend who has consulted me. He is a rather simple young man; he has written to me that he has discovered that a woman who has just given herself to him, has another lover at the same time. He has asked me what he ought to do."

"What answer have you given him?"

"Two questions: Is she pretty? and do you love her? If you love her, forget her; if she is pretty and you do not love her, keep her for your pleasure; there will always be time to abandon her if you have to do only with her beauty, and she is worth about as much as any other."

On hearing me speak thus, Brigitte left the child that she was holding; she had gone and sat down at the farther end of the room. We were without light; the moon, which lit up the place that Brigitte had just left, cast a deep shadow on the sofa where she was seated. The words that I had spoken bore so hard, so

cruel a meaning, that I was myself distracted by them and my heart was filled with bitterness. The child, restless, called Brigitte, and became sad on looking at us. Its joyous cries, its little babbling, gradually ceased; it went to sleep on the couch. Thus all three of us remained silent, and a cloud passed over the moon.

A servant entered, who came in search of the child; a light was brought in. I rose, and Brigitte at the same time; but she placed both her hands on her heart, and fell to the floor at the foot of her bed.

I ran to her, frightened; she had not lost consciousness and entreated me not to call any one. She told me that she was subject to violent palpitations that had tormented her since her youth and thus suddenly seized upon her, but that there was no danger, however, in these attacks, nor any remedy to be used. I was on my knees near her; she sweetly opened her arms to me; I took hold of her head and rested it on my shoulder. "Ah! my friend," she said, "I pity you."

"Listen to me," I said in her ear, "I am a silly wretch, but I cannot keep anything on my heart. Who is that Monsieur Dalens who lives on the mountain and who sometimes comes to see you?"

She seemed astonished at hearing me pronounce this name. "Dalens?" she said, "he is a friend of my husband."

She looked at me as if to add: "What is the object of this question?" It seemed to me that her countenance

had become clouded again. I bit my lips. "If she wants to deceive me," I thought, "I was wrong in speaking."

Brigitte rose with difficulty; she took her fan and walked through the room with rapid strides. She was breathing violently; I had wounded her. She remained pensive for some time, and we exchanged two or three looks that were almost cold and seemed hostile. She went to her secretary, which she opened, took from it a package of letters tied together with silk, and threw it in front of me without saying a word.

But I looked neither at her nor at the letters; I had just thrown a stone into an abyss, and I heard its echo resounding. For the first time, offended pride had appeared on Brigitte's countenance. There was no longer in her eyes either restlessness or pity, and, as I had just felt myself quite different from what I had ever been, I had also just seen in her a woman who was unknown to me.

"Read that," she said at last. I advanced and reached out my hand to her. "Read that! read that!" she repeated, in an icy tone.

I was holding the letters. I felt at that moment so persuaded of her innocence, and I found myself so unjust, that I was penetrated with repentance. "You remind me," she said to me, "that I owe you the history of my life; be seated, and you will know it. You will then open these drawers, and you will read all that there is here written in my hand or by others."

She sat down and pointed to an arm-chair for me. I saw the effort that she was making to speak. She was as pale as death ; her changed voice spoke with difficulty, and her throat was contracted.

“Brigitte! Brigitte!” I exclaimed, “In Heaven’s name, do not speak! God is my witness that I was not born such as you believe me; I have never in my life been either suspicious or distrustful. I have been ruined, my heart has been perverted. A deplorable experience has led me to a precipice, and, for a year past, I have had nothing but what there is of evil here below. God is my witness that, until this day, I did not believe myself capable of this ignoble rôle, the last of all, that of a jealous man. God is my witness that I love you, and that there is only you in this world who could cure me of the past. I have had to do until now only with women who deceived me or who were unworthy of love. I have led the life of a libertine; I have, in my heart, memories that will never be effaced from it. Is it my fault if a calumny, if the most vague of accusations, the most untenable, meets to-day in this heart, with its fibres still suffering and ready to receive everything that resembles sorrow? Mention has been made to me this evening of a man whom I do not know, of whose existence I was ignorant; they have given me to understand that there had been talk about you and him that proves nothing; I do not want to ask you anything about him; I have suffered on that account, I have

so acknowledged to you, and that is an irreparable wrong. But, rather than accept what you propose to me, I am going to throw all into the fire. Ah! my friend, do not degrade me; do not go so far as to justify yourself, do not punish me with suffering. How could I, at the bottom of my heart, suspect you of deceiving me? No, you are beautiful and you are sincere; a single one of your looks, Brigitte, tells me of it at greater length than I need to make me love you. If you knew what horrors, what monstrous perfidies the child before you has seen! If you knew how people have treated him, how they have mocked him for all that was good in him, how they have taken care to teach him all that could lead him to doubt, to jealousy, to despair! Alas! alas! my dear mistress, if you knew who loves you! Do not reproach me in the least; be courageous enough to pity me; I need to forget that other persons exist besides you. Who knows through what trials, through what frightful moments of sorrow, it will be necessary for me to pass! I did not suspect that it might be thus, I did not believe that I should have to fight. Since you are mine, I see what I have done; I have felt while embracing you how much my lips had been sullied. In Heaven's name, help me to live! God made me better than that."

Brigitte extended her arms to me, gave me the most tender caresses. She entreated me to tell her all that had given rise to that sad scene. I mentioned to her

only what Larive had said to me, and dared not acknowledge to her that I had questioned Mercanson. She absolutely wanted me to listen to her explanations. Monsieur de Dalens had loved her ; but he was a frivolous man, quite dissipated and very inconstant ; she had given him to understand that, not wanting to marry again, she could only entreat him to change his language, and he had resigned with good grace ; but his visits, from that time, had been getting rarer, and now he came no more. She took from the bundle a letter that she showed me, and the date of which was recent ; I could not help blushing on finding in it the confirmation of what she had just said to me ; she assured me that she forgave me, and required of me, as the only chastisement, the promise that, thereafter, I would inform her on the very spot of whatever might awaken in me any suspicion about her. Our treaty was sealed with a kiss, and, when I left, at daylight, we had both of us forgotten that Monsieur Dalens existed.

II

A sort of stagnant inertia, tinged with a bitter joy, is common to debauchees. It is a consequence of a life of caprice, in which nothing is regulated according to the needs of the body, but according to the fancies of

the mind, and in which the one ought always to be ready to obey the other. Youth and the will may resist excesses ; but nature is avenged in silence, and the day on which she decides to repair her strength, the will is dying to await her and to abuse her afresh.

Finding then around him all the objects that tempted him the evening before, the man who no longer has the strength to grasp them can give to what surrounds him only the smile of disgust. Add that these very objects, which keenly excite his desire, are never approached in cold blood ; all that the debauchee loves, he takes possession of with violence ; his life is a fever ; his organs, in order to seek enjoyment, are obliged to bring themselves to the level of fermented liquors, courtesans, and sleepless nights ; in his days of weariness and sloth, he feels, then, a much greater distance than another man between his powerlessness and his temptations, and, to resist the latter, it is necessary that pride come to his aid and make him believe that he disdains them. It is thus that he incessantly spits on all the feasts of his life, and, that between a parching thirst and a profound satiety, tranquil vanity leads him to death.

Though I was no longer a debauchee, it suddenly occurred to me that my body recalled that I had been so. It is quite plain that until then I had not noticed it. In the face of the sorrow that I had felt at my father's death, everything had at first caused silence. A violent love had come ; as long as I was in solitude,

weariness had not to struggle. Sad or gay, according to the moment, what matters it to him who is alone?

As zinc, that half-metal, taken from the bluish vein in which it sleeps in calamine, emits from itself a ray of sunshine as it approaches virgin copper, so Brigitte's kisses gradually reawakened in my heart what I carried buried there. As soon as I found myself face to face with her, I perceived what I was.

There were certain days when I felt, of a morning, such an odd disposition of mind that it is impossible to describe it. I awoke without reason like a man who the evening before has been guilty of an excess at table that exhausted him. All sensations from without caused me an unbearable fatigue, and all known and customary objects displeased me and wearied me; if I spoke, it was to turn into ridicule what others said or what I myself thought. Then, stretched on a sofa, and, as it were, incapable of motion, I failed of deliberate purpose to carry out all the promenade plans that we had agreed upon the evening before; I imagined that I was seeking in my memory for the best of what, during my good moments, I had been able to say of my tenderest and most sincere feelings to my dear mistress, and I was satisfied only when my ironical pleasantries had spoiled and poisoned those memories of the happy days. "Might you not leave me that?" Brigitte sadly asked of me. "If there are two such different men in you,

might you not, when the bad arises, be satisfied with forgetting the good?"

The patience with which Brigitte met these aberrations only, however, excited my ill-omened gayety. Strange to say, the man who suffers, deigns to cause suffering in what he loves! That one should have so little control over one's self, is that not the worst of maladies? What is there more cruel to a woman than to see a man who is leaving her arms turn, by an inexcusable caprice, into derision that which, hallowed by happy nights, is most sacred and most mysterious? She did not, however, fly from me; she remained near me crouched on her carpet, whilst, in my ferocious humor, I was thus insulting love, and letting my madness grumble on a mouth moist with her kisses.

On those days, contrary to my custom, I felt myself in the mood to speak of Paris and to represent my debauched life as the best thing in the world. "You are only a devotee," I laughingly said to Brigitte: "you do not know what it is. There is nothing like men without care and who make love without believing in it." Was this not saying that I did not believe in it?

"Well," Brigitte answered me, "teach me to please you always. I am perhaps as pretty as the mistresses whom you regret; if I have not the wit they had, to divert you after their fashion, I only ask to learn. Do as if you did not love me, and let me love you without saying anything about it. If I am a devotee at church,

I am so likewise in love. What must be done for you to believe it?"

Behold her before her mirror, dressing in the middle of the day as if for a ball or for a feast, affecting a coquetry which, however, she could not endure, seeking to assume the same tone as I, laughing and skipping through the room. "Am I to your taste?" she said. "Which of your mistresses do you find that I resemble? Am I pretty enough to make you forget that one may still believe in love? Have I the air of a care-naught?" Then, in the midst of that factitious joy, I saw her as she turned her back to me, and an involuntary shudder made the dull flowers that she was placing there tremble on her hair. I then sprang to her feet. "Stop," I said to her, "you too closely resemble what you want to imitate and what my lips are vile enough to dare to bring up before you. Remove those flowers, remove that dress. Let us wash that gayety with a sincere tear; do not remind me that I am only the prodigal son; I know the past only too well."

But this very repentance was cruel: it proved to her that the phantoms which I had in my heart were full of reality. In yielding to an impulse of horror, I did nothing but tell her clearly that her resignation and her desire to please me presented to me only an impure image.

And it was true. I arrived at Brigitte's in a transport of joy, swearing to forget in her arms my sorrows and my past life; on both knees I protested my respect for

her as far as the foot of her bed ; I entered there as if going into a sanctuary ; I extended my arms to her while shedding tears ; then she made a certain gesture, she removed her dress in a certain manner, she said a certain word on approaching me ; and I remembered all of a sudden such a girl who, on removing her dress one evening and approaching my bed, had made that gesture, had spoken that word.

Poor devoted soul ! what did you suffer, then, on seeing me grow pale before you, when my arms, ready to receive you, fell as if deprived of life on your sweet and fresh shoulder ! when the kiss closed on my lip, and when the full look of love, that pure ray of God's light, trembled in my eyes as an arrow that the wind turns aside ! Ah ! Brigitte, what diamonds flashed from your pupils ! from what treasures of sublime charity you drew, with a patient hand, your sad love full of pity !

For a long time, good and bad days succeeded each other almost regularly ; I showed myself alternately severe and mocking, tender and devoted, cold and proud, repentant and submissive. Desgenais's figure, which was the first to appear to me as if to warn me of what I was going to do, was incessantly present to my thought. During my days of doubt and coldness, I conversed, so to say, with him ; often, at the very moment when I had just offended Brigitte by some cruel bantering, I said to myself : " If he were in my place, he would exceed what I have done ! "

Sometimes, also, while putting on my hat to go to Brigitte's house, I looked at myself in the glass and said: "What great harm is there in it? After all, I have a pretty mistress; she has given herself to a libertine, let her take me such as I am." I arrived with a smile on my lips, I threw myself into an arm-chair in an indolent and deliberate way; then I saw Brigitte approach with her large, soft, and restless eyes; I took her small white hands in mine, and I lost myself in an infinite dream.

How give a name to a nameless thing? Was I good or was I wicked? Was I distrustful or was I mad? It is not necessary to reflect on that, it is necessary to go on; that was settled.

We had as a neighbor a young woman whose name was Madame Daniel; she was not wanting in beauty, still less in coquetry; she was poor and strove to pass as being rich; she came to see us after dinner and always played a high game against us, though her losses put her ill at ease; she sang and had no voice. In the heart of that unknown village, where her evil destiny compelled her to bury herself, she felt herself a prey to an unheard-of thirst for pleasure. She spoke only of Paris, where she set foot two or three days in the year; she pretended to follow the fashions; my dear Brigitte helped her as best she could, while smiling at her from pity; her husband was employed in the Land Registry office: he took her on feast-days to the chief town of

the Department, and, rigged out in all her deckings, the little woman danced there to her heart's content with the garrison, in the Prefecture salons. She returned from there with her eyes bright and her body fatigued ; she then came to us so as to have to tell of her prowess and of the petty griefs that she had caused. The rest of the time she was reading romances, having never seen anything of her own household, which, moreover, was not savory.

Every time that I saw her I did not fail to make fun of her, finding nothing so ridiculous as that life she thought she was leading ; I interrupted her festive narratives to ask her to give news of her husband and of her father-in-law, whom she detested above everything, the one because he was her husband and the other because he was only a peasant ; finally, we were scarcely together before we were disputing on some subject.

I took a notion, in my evil days, to pay court to that woman, merely to annoy Brigitte. "See," I said, "how perfectly Madame Daniel understands life ! Being of such a playful disposition, could one desire a more charming mistress?" I then undertook to praise her : her insignificant tattle became a freedom full of delicacy, her exaggerated pretensions, a desire to please that was quite natural ; was it her fault if she was poor ? at least she thought only of pleasure, and so confessed frankly ; she preached no sermons and did not listen to those of others. I went so far as to say to Brigitte that

she ought to take her for a model, and that that was altogether the sort of woman that pleased me.

Poor Madame Daniel suddenly noticed in Brigitte's eyes some signs of melancholy. She was a strange creature, as good and as sincere, when drawn away from her frippery, as she was foolish when she was intent upon it. On that occasion she did something quite like herself, that is, at the same time good and foolish. One fine day, on the promenade, as they were alone, she threw herself into Brigitte's arms, told her that she noticed that I was beginning to pay attention to her and that I addressed to her some remarks of which the intention was not doubtful ; but that she knew that I was the lover of another, and that, as for her, whatever might happen, she would die rather than destroy the happiness of a friend. Brigitte thanked her, and Madame Daniel, having set her conscience at rest, scrupled no more about distracting me as much as possible by her glances.

In the evening, after she had left, Brigitte told me, in a harsh tone, what had taken place in the wood ; she entreated me to spare her similar affronts in future. "Not," she said, "that I pay any attention to them, or that I believe in these pleasantries ; but, if you have any love for me, it seems to me that it is useless to tell a third party that it is not felt by you every day."

"Is it possible," I replied laughing, "that that is of any importance? You see clearly that I am joking and that it is to kill time."

“Ah! my friend, my friend,” said Brigitte, “it is a misfortune to have to kill time.”

Some days afterwards I proposed to her to go ourselves to the Prefecture and to see Madame Daniel dancing; she consented to it regretfully. While she was finishing her toilet, I was near the mantel-piece, and I was making her some reproach about her losing her former gayety. “What ails you, then?” I asked her—I knew it as well as she did—“why this morose air that no longer leaves you? In truth you make our life a rather mournful companionship. I knew you formerly more joyous, more free and more open; it is scarcely flattering to me to see that I have been the cause of its changing. But you have the spirit of the cloisters; you were born to live in a convent.”

It was Sunday; when we passed along the promenade, Brigitte ordered the carriage to be stopped to say good-evening to some good friends, fresh and fine country girls who were going to dance at Les Tilleuls. After she had left them, she looked out of the window for a long time; her little ball cost her dear; she raised her handkerchief to her eyes.

At the Prefecture we found Madame Daniel in all her glory. I began by making her dance so often that it was remarked; I paid her a thousand compliments, and she answered them as best she could.

Brigitte was in front of us; her look never left us. What I experienced is difficult to tell: it was pleasure

and pain ; clearly, she was jealous ; but, instead of being touched thereby, I did all that was necessary to disturb her more.

I expected, on returning, reproaches on her part ; not only did she not make them, but she remained gloomy and mute the next day and the day following. When I arrived at her house, she came to me and embraced me ; after which, we sat down facing each other, both pre-occupied and scarcely exchanging a few insignificant words. The third day she spoke, broke out into bitter reproaches, told me that my conduct was inexplicable, that she knew not what to think of it, except that I no longer loved her ; but that she could not bear this life, and that she was resolved on anything rather than endure my oddities and my coldness. She had her eyes filled with tears, and I was ready to ask her pardon, when there suddenly escaped from her a few words so bitter that my pride revolted. I replied to her in the same tone, and our quarrel assumed a violent character. I told her that it was ridiculous that I could not inspire my mistress with confidence sufficient for her to trust in me as to my most ordinary actions ; that Madame Daniel was only a pretext ; that she knew very well that I did not think seriously of that woman ; that her pretended jealousy was only a very real despotism, and that, moreover, if this life fatigued her, it depended only on her to break it off.

“Be it so,” she replied. “The more so, as, since I have been yours, I no longer recognize you ; you have no

doubt played a comedy to persuade me that you loved me ; it tires you, and you have only insult to give me back. You suspect me of deceiving you at the first word that one says to you, and I have no business to endure an insult that you heap on me. You are no longer the man whom I have loved."

"I know," I said to her, "what your sufferings are. On what does it depend that they are not renewed at every step that I may take? Ere long I shall not have permission to address a word to any one but you. You feign to be maltreated so as to be able to give insult yourself ; you accuse me of tyranny so that I may become a slave. Since I disturb your rest, live in peace ; you will not see me again."

We parted in wrath, and I spent a day without seeing her. On the following evening, toward midnight, I felt in me a sadness that I could not resist. I shed a torrent of tears ; I overwhelmed myself with insults which I well merited. I said to myself that I was only a madman, and only a wicked sort of madman, to make the noblest, the best of creatures suffer. I ran to her house to throw myself at her feet.

On entering the garden I saw her room lit up, and a doubtful thought passed through my mind. "She is not expecting me at this hour," I said to myself ; "who knows what she is doing? I left her in tears yesterday ; I am going, perhaps, to find her again getting ready to sing and not caring any more for me than if I did not

exist. She is, perhaps, at her toilet, like the *other*. I must enter gently and know what to expect."

I advanced on tiptoe, and, the door being by chance open, I could see Brigitte without being seen.

She was seated in front of her table and was writing in that same book which had caused my first doubts on her account. In her left hand she held a small white wooden box which she looked at from time to time with a sort of nervous trembling. I do not know what there was of a sinister effect in the appearance of tranquillity that reigned in the room. Her secretary was open, and several bundles of paper were arranged there as if they had just been put in order.

I made some noise in pushing the door. She rose, went to the secretary, which she closed, and then came to me with a smile: "Octave," she said to me, "we are two children, my dear. Our quarrel is quite senseless, and, if you had not returned this evening, I would have been at your house to-night. Pardon me, it is I who am wrong. Madame Daniel is coming to dinner to-morrow; make me repent, if you wish, for what you call my despotism. Provided that you love me, I am happy; let us forget what has passed and let us not spoil our happiness."

III

Our quarrel had been, so to say, less sad than our reconciliation; it was accompanied, on Brigitte's part, with a mystery that frightened me at first, and afterwards left a continual restlessness in my soul.

The more I went, the more were developed in me, despite all my efforts, the two elements of misfortune that the past had bequeathed to me : sometimes a furious jealousy full of reproach and insult ; sometimes a cruel gayety, an affected levity that outraged, while bantering what I held most dear. Thus inexorable memories pursued me unrelentingly ; thus Brigitte, seeing herself treated alternately either as a faithless mistress or as a kept girl, fell gradually into a sadness that devastated our whole life ; and worst of all is that this very sadness, though I felt the reason for it and though I felt myself guilty, was none the less chargeable to me. I was young and I loved pleasure ; that every-day familiarity with a woman older than myself, who was suffering and languishing, that countenance ever more and more serious which I had always before me, all that was revolting to my youth and inspired me with bitter regrets for my old-time liberty.

When, on a beautiful moonlight night, we were slowly traversing the forest, we both of us felt ourselves seized

with a deep melancholy. Brigitte was looking at me pitifully. We went and sat down on a rock that overlooked a desert gorge ; we spent whole hours there ; her half-veiled eyes plunged through mine into my heart, then she turned them to nature, to the heavens, to the valley. "Ah ! my dear child," she said, "how I pity you ! you do not love me."

To reach that rock it was necessary to go two leagues through the woods ; the same to return, and that made four. Brigitte was not afraid either of fatigue or of the night. We set out at eleven o'clock in the evening to return only some time in the morning. When we took those long journeys, she wore a blue blouse and men's garments, saying gayly that her customary costume was not made for brushwood. She walked in front of me in the sand, with a determined step and with so charming a mingling of feminine delicacy and childish temerity that I stopped to look at her every moment. It seemed, once she had started, that she had to perform a difficult task, but a sacred one ; she went ahead like a soldier, swinging her arms and singing at the top of her voice ; all of a sudden she turned round, came to me and embraced me. It was to go on ; returning, she leaned on my arm : then, more singing ; there were confidences, tender chats in a low voice, though we were the only beings for more than two leagues around. I do not remember a single word exchanged during the return that was not of love or of friendship.

One evening, in order to reach the rock, we had taken a road of our own invention, that is, we had cut across the woods without following a road. Brigitte went there with such a good heart, and her little velvet cap on her luxuriant blond hair so distinctly gave her the air of a sturdy urchin that I forgot that she was a woman, when there was some step hard to cross. More than once she had been obliged to call me back so as to aid her to climb the rocks, whilst, without thinking of her, I had already mounted higher. I cannot describe the effect then produced, on that clear and magnificent night, in the midst of the forest, by that half-joyous, half-plaintive woman's voice, emerging from that small scholar's body hanging on to furze bushes and tree-trunks, and no longer able to advance. I took her in my arms. "Come, madame," I said to her, laughing, "you are a pretty little brave and alert mountaineer; but you are peeling the skin off your white hands, and, in spite of your thick iron-tipped shoes, your stick and your martial air, I see that it is necessary to carry you."

We arrived all out of breath; I had a strap around my body and I carried something to drink in a wicker-covered bottle. When we were on the rock, my dear Brigitte asked me for my bottle; I had lost it, as well as a tinder-box that served us for another purpose: it was to read the names of the roads written on the posts when we had gone astray, which was happening continually. I then clambered to the posts, when it was

necessary to kindle the tinder sufficiently for the purpose of catching in transit the half-effaced letters ; all that madly, like the two children that we were. It was necessary to us, when at a cross-roads we had to decipher not one, but five or six posts, in order to discover the right one. But that evening our entire baggage had remained on the grass. "Well," said Brigitte to me, "we will spend the night here ; and, indeed, I am tired. This rock is a rather hard bed ; we will make one with dry leaves. Let us sit down and talk no more of it."

The evening was superb : the moon was rising behind us ; I saw it still to my left. Brigitte watched it for a long time emerging from the black tracery that the wooded hills outlined on the horizon. In proportion as the light of the orb emerged from behind the thick copse and was spreading in the heavens, Brigitte's song became slower and more melancholy. She soon bent down, and, throwing her arms around my neck : "Do not believe," she said, "that I do not understand your heart and that I make reproaches to you for what you make me suffer. It is not your fault, my love, if you are lacking in strength to forget your past life ; it is in good faith that you have loved me, and I will never regret, even should I have to die of your love, the day on which I gave myself. You believed that you were born again to life and that you would forget in my arms the memory of the women who ruined you. Alas !

Octave, I formerly smiled at that precocious experience which you said you had acquired and of which I heard you boast, like children who know nothing. I believed that I had only to wish, and that all that was good in your heart would come to your lips at my first kiss. You believed so yourself, and both of us have been mistaken. O child! you carry in your heart a wound that will not be healed; that woman who deceived you, you must indeed have loved dearly! yes, more than me, much more, alas! since with all my poor love I cannot efface her image; it must also be that she cruelly deceived you, since it is in vain that I am faithful to you! and the others, those wretches! what have they done to poison your youth? The pleasures that they sold to you were, then, very keen and very terrible, since you ask me to resemble them! You remember them beside me! Ah! my child, that is the most cruel. I prefer to see you unjust and cruel, to reproach me with imaginary crimes and to be avenged on me for the evil done to you by your first mistress, than to find on your countenance that frightful gayety, that mocking libertine air that suddenly comes to place itself like a plaster mask between your lips and mine. Tell me, Octave, why is that? why these days when you speak to me of love with contempt and when you so sadly mock even our sweetest ebullitions? What control over your irritable nerves, then, had been gained by that frightful life which you have led, for such insults still to float on your lips in spite of

you? Yes, in spite of you, for your heart is noble, you, yourself, blush at what you are doing; you love me too much not to suffer from it, because you see that I am suffering from it. Ah! now I know you. The first time that I saw you thus, I was seized with a terror of which nothing can give you an idea. I believed that you were only a rake, that you had designedly deceived me by the pretence of a love that you did not feel, and that I saw you such as you really were. O my friend! I thought of death; what a night I spent! You do not know my life; you do not know that I, who am speaking to you, have not had a sweeter experience of the world than you. Alas! life is sweet, that is, to those who do not know it.

“You, my dear Octave, are not the first man whom I have loved. At the bottom of my heart there is a fatal history, which I desire that you should know. My father had intended me, while yet young, for the only son of an old friend. They were country neighbors and owned two small estates of almost equal value. The two families saw each other nearly every day and, so to say, lived together. My father died; a long time had elapsed since we had lost our mother. I lived under the guardianship of my aunt, whom you know. A journey that she was compelled to take some time afterwards obliged her to entrust me in her turn to my future father-in-law. He never called me anything but his daughter, and it was so well known in the country that

Part Fourth Chapter III

"Well," said Brigitte to me, "we will spend the night here; and, indeed, I am tired. This rock is a rather hard bed; we will make one with dry leaves."





I was to marry his son that both of us were left together in the greatest liberty.

“This young man, whose name it is useless to tell you, had always appeared to love me. What for years had been a childhood’s friendship became love in time. He began, when we were alone, to speak to me of the happiness that awaited us ; he pictured his impatience to me. I was younger than he by only a year ; but he had made in the neighborhood the acquaintance of a man of bad life, a sort of adventurer to whose advice he had listened. Whilst I was giving myself up to his caresses with the confidence of a child, he resolved to deceive his father, to break his word with all of us and to abandon me after having ruined me.

“His father had made us come to his room one morning, and there, in the presence of the whole family, had announced to us that the day was fixed for our marriage. That very evening he met me in the garden, spoke to me of his love more forcibly than ever, told me that, since the date was fixed upon, he regarded himself as my husband, and that before God he was so since his birth. I had no other excuse to allege than my youth, my ignorance, and the confidence that I had. I gave myself to him before being his wife, and eight days afterwards he left his father’s house ; he fled with a woman with whom his new friend had made him acquainted ; he wrote to us that he was leaving for Germany, and we have never seen him since.

“That, in a word, is the history of my life ; my husband knew it as you know it now. I have a great deal of pride, my child, and I had sworn in my solitude that never would a man make me suffer a second time what I suffered then. I have seen you and I have forgotten my oath, but not my sorrow. I must be treated gently ; if you are ill, I am so likewise ; we must be careful of each other. You see, Octave, that I also know what the memory of the past is. It inspires me also when near you with moments of cruel terror ; I shall have more courage than you, for perhaps I have suffered more. It will be for me to begin ; my heart is quite far from sure of itself, I am still very weak ; my life in this village was so peaceful before you came here ! I had so often promised myself not to change anything in it ! All that makes me exacting. Well, no matter, I am yours. You have told me, in your good moments, that Providence has charged me to watch over you like a mother. It is the truth, my love ; I am not your mistress every day ; there are many days when I am, when I want to be, your mother. Yes, when you make me suffer, I no longer see my lover in you ; you are then only a sick child, distrustful or mutinous, whom I want to care for or cure in order again to find him whom I love and whom I want to love always. May God give me this strength !” she added, as she looked towards heaven. “May God who sees us, who hears me, may the God of mothers and lovers let me accomplish this task !

Even should I succumb, even should my pride that revolts, my poor heart that is breaking, in spite of me, even should my whole life ——”

She did not finish; her tears stopped her. O God! I saw her there on her knees, her hands clasped, resting on the rock; the wind made her sway in front of me like the heather that surrounds us. Frail and sublime creature! she was praying for her love. I raised her up in my arms. “O my sole friend!” I exclaimed, “O my mistress, my mother and my sister! ask also for me that I may love you as you deserve. Ask that I may live; that my heart may be washed in your tears; that it may become a stainless sacrifice, and that we may share it before God!”

We threw ourselves on the rock. All was silence around us; above our heads spread the sky resplendent with stars. “Do you recognize it?” I said to Brigitte; “do you remember the first day?”

Thank God, since that evening we have never returned to that rock. It is an altar that has remained pure; it is one of the only spectres of my life that is still clad in white when it passes before my eyes.

IV

As I was crossing the square, I saw two men stop one evening, and one of them said rather loudly: “It appears that he has maltreated her.” “It is her fault,”

the other replied ; “ why choose such a man ? He has to do only with fast girls ; she is enduring the penalty of her folly.”

I advanced in the darkness to recognize those who were speaking thus and to try to hear more from them ; but they went away on seeing me.

I found Brigitte restless ; her aunt was seriously ill ; she had only time to say a few words to me. I could not see her for a whole week ; I knew that she had brought a physician from Paris ; at last, one day she sent for me.

“ My aunt is dead,” she said to me ; “ I lose the only being that remained to me on earth. I am now alone in the world, and I am going to leave the country.”

“ Am I, then, really nothing to you ?”

“ Yes, my friend ; you know that I love you, and I often think that you love me. But how could I count on you ? I am your mistress, alas ! without your being my lover. It is for you that Shakespeare uses this sad expression : ‘ Get thee a changeable taffeta doublet made, for your mind is like the thousand-hued opal.’ And as for me, Octave,” she added, as she pointed to her mourning dress, “ I am devoted to a single color, and for a long time I will not change it again.”

“ Leave the country if you will ; either I will kill myself, or I will follow you. Ah ! Brigitte,” I continued, as I threw myself on my knees before her, “ you thought that you were alone when you saw your aunt die !

That is the most cruel punishment that you could inflict on me ; never have I felt more painfully the wretchedness of my love for you. You must retract that horrible thought ; I merit it, but it is killing me. O God ! can it be true that I count as nothing in your life, or that I am something in it only by the evil that I am doing you ! ”

“ I do not know,” she said, “ who is concerned about us ; there have been strange remarks spread abroad for some time past, in this village and in the neighborhood. Some say that I am ruining myself ; they accuse me of imprudence and folly ; others represent you as a cruel and dangerous man. They have penetrated, I know not how, even into our most secret thoughts ; what I imagined I alone knew, those inequalities in your conduct and the sad scenes to which they have given rise, all that is known ; my poor aunt has spoken to me of it, and long ago she knew of it without saying anything about it. Who knows but all that made her sink more rapidly, more cruelly, into the grave ? When I meet my former friends on the promenade, they approach me coldly or shun me on my approach ; my dear peasant women themselves, those good girls who loved me so much, shrug their shoulders on Sunday when they see my place empty under the orchestra at their little ball. Why, how does that happen ? I do not know, nor you either, no doubt ; but I must leave, I cannot bear that. And this death,

this sudden and frightful malady, above all, this solitude! this empty room! Courage fails me; my love, my love, do not abandon me!"

She wept; in the neighboring room I noticed wearing apparel in disorder, a trunk on the floor, and all that betold of preparations for leaving. It was clear that at the moment of her aunt's death, Brigitte had wanted to leave without me, and that she had not the strength for it. She was indeed so broken down that she spoke only with difficulty; her situation was horrible, and it was I who made it so. Not only was she unhappy, but she was insulted in public, and the man in whom she should have found at the same time a support and a consoler, was to her only a still more fruitful source of restlessness and torture.

I so keenly felt my wrong-doings that I was ashamed of myself. After so many promises, so much useless exaltation, so many plans and so many hopes, this, then, was what I had come to, and in the space of three months! I thought I had a treasure in my heart, and there had come out of it only a bitter spleen, the shadow of a dream, and the misfortune of a woman whom I adored. For the first time I found myself really face to face with myself; Brigitte uttered no reproach; she wanted to leave and could not do so; she was ready to suffer further. I asked myself all of a sudden if I ought not to leave her, if it was not my duty to fly from her and to deliver her from a scourge.

I arose, and, passing into the next room, I went and sat down on Brigitte's trunk. There, I supported my brow on my hands and remained as if annihilated. I looked around me at all those half-completed packages, the clothing spread out on the furniture; alas! I knew them all; there was a little of my heart after all that had touched her. I began to calculate all the evil that I had caused; I again saw my dear Brigitte pass under the linden alley, her white goat running after her.

"Oh, man!" I exclaimed to myself, "and by what right? What makes you so bold as to come here and put your hand on this woman? Who has given permission for another to suffer on your account? You comb yourself before your mirror, and go your way, foppish, in good luck, to the home of your distracted mistress; you throw yourself on the cushions where she has just prayed for you and for her, and you tap gently, with an easy air, on those slender hands that are still trembling. You understand how to excite a poor creature, and you perorate rather warmly in your amorous madness, almost like lawyers who come red-eyed out of a petty suit that they have lost. You play the little prodigal son, you bandy words with suffering; you find leisure to commit a boudoir murder with pin-stabs. What will you say to the living God when your work shall be finished? Whither goes the woman who loves you? Whither do you glide, where do you fall, whilst she is leaning on you? With what countenance

will you one day bury your pale and wretched lover, as she has just buried the last being who protected her? Yes, yes, without a doubt you will bury her, for your love is killing her and is consuming her; you have vowed her to your Furies, and it is she who is appeasing them. If you follow this woman, she will die through you. Take care! her good angel hesitates; he has come to strike that blow in that house in order to drive a fatal and shameful passion from it! he has inspired Brigitte with that thought of her leaving; he is perhaps whispering in her ear at this moment his last warning. O assassin! O executioner! take care! it is a question of life and of death!"

Thus did I speak to myself; then I saw on a corner of the sofa a little striped gingham dress, already folded to be put into the trunk. It had been the witness of one of the few of our happy days. I touched it and raised it up.

"I to leave you!" I said to it; "I to lose you! O cherished gown! you want to leave without me?"

"No, I cannot abandon Brigitte; at this moment it would be an act of cowardice. She has just lost her aunt, look at her alone: she is the object of the remarks of some unknown enemy. It can be only Mercanson; he no doubt has told of his conversation with me about Dalens, and, seeing me jealous one day, he has concluded from that and guessed at the rest. Assuredly, he is a snake that comes to befoul my dearly-beloved flower. In the first place, I must punish him for it, then

I must repair the evil that I have done to Brigitte. What a madman I am! I think of leaving her when it is necessary to devote my life to her, to expiate my wrong-doings, to give back to her, in happiness, in attentions and in love, what tears I have caused to flow from her eyes! when I am her only support in the world, her only friend, her only sword! when I ought to follow her to the end of the world, to shelter her with my body, to console her for having loved me and for having given herself to me!"

"Brigitte!" I exclaimed as I entered the room in which she had remained, "wait for me an hour, and I will return."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Wait for me," I said to her, "do not leave without me. Remember the words of Ruth: 'Whither thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.'"

I left her hurriedly and I ran to Mercanson's; I was told that he had gone out, and I entered his house to wait for him.

I had sat down in a corner, on the priest's leather chair, in front of his black and dirty table. I was beginning to find the time long, when I came to recall my duel about my first mistress.

"I received there," I said to myself, "a good pistol shot, and I have remained a ridiculous madman from it.

What have I come to do here? This priest will not fight; if I go and pick a quarrel with him, he will answer me that the form of his dress excuses him from listening to me, and he will prate about it a little more when I shall have left. What, moreover, is that talking which people are doing? about what is Brigitte disturbed? It is said that she is ruining her reputation, that I maltreat her and that she is wrong to endure it. What folly! that concerns no one; there is nothing better than to let them talk; in such a case, to be concerned about these annoyances is to attach importance to them. Can one prevent provincial folk from being concerned about their neighbors? Can one prevent prudes from speaking ill of a woman who takes a lover? What means could one find for putting a stop to a public rumor? If people say that I maltreat her, it is for me to prove the contrary by my conduct toward her, and not by violence. It would be as ridiculous to seek a quarrel with Mercanson, as to leave a country because people chatter there. No, it is unnecessary to leave the country; it is impolitic; it would be telling everybody that people were right and playing into the hands of the babblers. It is not the right thing either to leave or to be concerned with talk."

I returned to Brigitte's. A half-hour had scarcely passed, and I had three times changed my mind. I dissuaded her from her plan; I told her what I had just done and why I had refrained. She listened to me

resignedly ; yet she wanted to leave ; that house in which her aunt had died was odious to her ; much effort was needed on my part to make her consent to remain ; I at last succeeded. We repeated to each other that we despised the world's talk, that it was not necessary to yield to them in anything nor to make any change in our habits of life. I swore to her that my love would console her for all her sorrows, and she feigned to hope so. I told her that this circumstance had so enlightened me on all my wrong-doings that my conduct would prove my repentance to her, that I wanted to drive away from me as a phantom all the bad leaven that remained in my heart, that she would henceforward have to suffer neither from my pride nor from my caprices ; and thus, sad and patient, ever hanging on my neck, she obeyed a mere caprice that I myself took for a flash of my reason.

V

One day, on returning to her home, I saw a little room open that she called her oratory ; the only furniture in it indeed was a kneeling-chair and a small altar, with a cross and some flower-vases. Moreover, the walls and the curtains, everything was as white as snow. She shut herself up there sometimes, but rarely, since I had been living with her.

I leaned against the door, and I saw Brigitte seated on the floor in the midst of flowers that she had just thrown down. She was holding a small wreath that appeared to me to be of dry grass, and was breaking it between her hands.

"What are you doing there?" I asked her. She started and arose. "It is nothing," she said, "child's play; it is an old wreath of roses that has faded in this oratory; it is a long time since I put it there; I have come to change my flowers."

She spoke in a trembling voice and seemed ready to faint. I remembered that name of Brigitte la Rose which I had heard given to her. I asked her if by chance it was not her rose wreath that she had just broken thus.

"No," she replied, as she grew pale.

"Yes," I exclaimed, "yes; on my life! give me the pieces!"

I picked them up and laid them on the altar, then I remained mute, my eyes fixed on those ruins.

"Should I not be right," she said, "if it was my wreath, to have removed it from that wall on which it was for so long a time? What are these ruins good for? Brigitte la Rose is no longer of this world, any more than the roses that baptized her."

She left; I heard a sob, and the door was closed on me; I fell on my knees on the stone and I wept bitterly.

When I went back to her, I found her seated at table ; dinner was ready, and she was waiting for me. I took my place in silence, and there was no question of what we had in our hearts.

VI

It was indeed Mercanson who in the village and in the neighboring châteaux had told of my conversation with him about Dalens, and the suspicions which, in spite of myself, I had let him clearly see into. You know how, in the provinces, slanderous talk is repeated, it flies from mouth to mouth, and is exaggerated ; that was what then happened.

Brigitte and I found ourselves sitting face to face with each other in a new position. Whatever weakness she had shown in her attempt at leaving, she had done it none the less. It was at my entreaty that she had remained ; there was an obligation in that. I had pledged myself not to disturb her rest either by my jealousy or by my levity ; every harsh or teasing word that escaped me was a fault, every sad look that she gave me was a reproach felt and merited.

Her good and simple naturalness made her at first find in her solitude an additional charm ; she could see me at any hour and without being obliged to take any

precaution. Perhaps she gave herself up to this facility in order to prove to me that she preferred her love to her reputation ; it seemed that she repented of having shown herself sensitive to the remarks of backbiters. However this may be, instead of being watchful of ourselves and defending ourselves from curiosity, we, on the contrary, assumed a sort of freer and more careless life than ever.

I went to her house at the breakfast hour ; having nothing to do during the day, I went out only with her. She kept me for dinner, the evening slipped away ; ere long, when the hour for returning had arrived, we imagined a thousand pretexts, we took a thousand illusory precautions, which, at bottom, were not such. At last I lived, so to say, at her house, and we made a semblance of believing that no one noticed it.

I kept my word for some time, and not a cloud disturbed our familiar chats. Those were happy days ; it is not of them that it is necessary to speak.

It was said everywhere in the country, that Brigitte was living publicly with a libertine who had come from Paris ; that her lover maltreated her, that their time was spent in leaving each other and in coming together again, but that all that would end badly. As much as they had bestowed praise on Brigitte for her past conduct, so much did they blame her now. There was nothing in that very conduct, formerly worthy of all praise, that they did not go and look up in order to give

it a bad interpretation. Her lonely journeyings in the mountains, the object of which was charity and which had never aroused suspicion, became all of a sudden the subject of by-talk and jibes. They spoke of her as of a woman who had lost all human respect and who must justly draw upon herself inevitable and frightful misfortunes.

I had told Brigitte that my opinion was to let them tattle, and I did not want to appear as noticing those remarks; but the truth is that they became unbearable to me. I went out sometimes expressly, and I went to pay visits in the neighborhood in order to try and hear a positive expression that I could have regarded as an insult, so as to demand satisfaction therefor. I listened attentively to all that was said in a low voice in a salon in which I found myself, but I could catch nothing; so as to tear me to pieces at their ease, they waited for me to leave. I then returned home and I told Brigitte that all those stories were only trifles, that one must be silly to take any notice of them; that people might talk of us as much as they pleased, and that I did not want to know anything of them.

Was I not guilty beyond all expression? If Brigitte was imprudent, was it not my part to reflect and to warn her of the danger? Quite the contrary, I, so to say, took sides with the world against her.

I had begun by showing myself careless; I soon came to showing myself wicked. "Truly," I said to Brigitte,

“people talk ill of your nocturnal excursions. Are you quite sure that they are wrong? Has nothing happened in the alleys and in the grottoes of that romantic forest? Have you never accepted, while returning at dusk, an unknown man’s arm, as you accepted mine? Was it indeed charity alone that served you as a divinity in that beautiful temple of verdure which you traversed so courageously?”

Brigitte’s first look, when I began to assume this tone, will never leave my memory; I myself shuddered at it. “But, bah!” I thought, “she would do like my first mistress, if I gave her occasion and cause for it; she would point her finger at me as a ridiculous fool, and I should pay for it all in the eyes of the public.”

From the man who doubts, to him who denies, there is hardly any distance. Every philosopher is cousin to an atheist. After having told Brigitte that I had doubts of her past conduct, I really doubted it; and, as soon as I doubted it, I did not believe in it.

I came to represent to myself that Brigitte was deceiving me, she whom I did not leave for an hour in the day; sometimes I designedly remained absent for rather long intervals, and I satisfied myself that it was to try her; but, in reality, it was only to give me, as if without my knowing it, a reason for doubting and bantering. Then I was satisfied when I remarked to her that, far from being more jealous, I no longer cared for those silly fears that formerly passed through my mind; be it well

understood that that meant that I did not esteem her enough to be jealous.

I had at first kept to myself the reflections that I made ; I soon found pleasure in making them openly in Brigitte's presence. Did we go out for a walk : "That dress is pretty," I said to her ; "such a girl among my friends has one like it, I believe." Were we at table : "Come, my dear, my former mistress sang her song at dessert ; it is right that you imitate her." Did she sit down at the piano : "Ah ! as a favor, play me the waltz, then, that was the rage last winter ; that recalls the happy time."

Reader, that lasted six months : for six entire months, Brigitte, calumniated, exposed to the insults of the world, had to endure on my part all the disdain and all the insults that a wrathful and cruel libertine could lavish on the girl that he was paying.

On leaving those frightful scenes in which my mind was being exhausted in tortures and was rending my own heart, in turn accusing and bantering, but always greedy to suffer and to return to the past ; on leaving there, a strange love, an exaltation driven to excess, made me treat my mistress as an idol, as a divinity. A quarter of an hour after having insulted her, I was on my knees ; as soon as I was no longer accusing, I was asking pardon ; as soon as I was no longer bantering, I was weeping. Then an unheard-of delirium, a fever of happiness, took possession of me ; I showed myself overcome with joy, I almost lost my reason by the violence

of my transports ; I knew not what to say, what to do, what to imagine, so as to repair the evil that I had done. I took Brigitte in my arms, and I made her repeat, a hundred times, a thousand times, that she loved me and that she forgave me. I spoke of expiating my wrongdoings and of blowing out my brains if I resumed maltreating her. These transports of the heart lasted whole nights, during which I did not cease to speak, to weep, to roll at Brigitte's feet, to intoxicate myself with an unbounded, enervating, mad love. Then morning came, day appeared ; I fell exhausted, I went to sleep, and I reawoke with a smile on my lips, mocking at everything and believing in nothing.

During those nights of terrible joy, Brigitte did not appear to remember that there was in me another man than he whom she had before her eyes. When I asked her forgiveness she shrugged her shoulders, as if to say to me : "Do you not know that I forgive you?" She felt herself smitten with my fever. How often I saw her, pale from pleasure and from love, saying to me that she wanted me thus, that those storms were her life ; that the sufferings which she had endured were dear to her thus paid for, that she would never complain as long as there remained in my heart a spark of our love ; that she knew that she would die of it, but that she hoped that I would die of it myself ; in fine, that everything was good to her, was sweet to her, coming from me, insults as well as tears, and that these delights were her tomb.

Yet the days were passing, and my evil was incessantly growing worse, my attacks of spitefulness and irony were assuming a sombre and unmanageable character. Amid my follies I had veritable attacks of fever that struck me down like lightning flashes; I awoke trembling in all my members and bathed in a cold perspiration. An impulse of surprise, an unexpected impression, made me jump so as to frighten those who saw me; Brigitte, on her part, though she did not complain, bore on her countenance marks of a profound change. When I began to maltreat her, she left without saying a word and shut herself up. Thank God, I never laid violent hands on her: in my worst fits of violence, I would have died rather than touch her.

One evening, the rain was beating against the window panes; we were alone, the curtains drawn. "I feel in a pleasant mood," I said to Brigitte, "and yet this horrible weather makes me sad in spite of myself. We must not let ourselves become so, and, if you are of my opinion, we will amuse ourselves despite the storm."

I arose and lit all the candles that were to be found in the candlesticks. The room, rather small, was suddenly lit up by them as if with a festal light. At the same time a raging fire—the winter had come—shed a stifling warmth there. "Come," I said, "what are we going to do while waiting for supper-time to arrive?"

I bethought me that in Paris it was then carnival time. It seemed to me that I saw passing before me the

maskers' carriages that were crossing one another on the boulevards. I heard the joyous crowd exchange a thousand astounding remarks on entering the theatres; I saw the lascivious dances, the variegated costumes, the wine and the foolery; all that was youthful in me made my heart bound.

"Let us disguise ourselves," I said to Brigitte. "It will be for us alone; what matters it? If we have no costumes, we have the wherewith to make them, and thereby we will pass the time more pleasantly."

From a wardrobe we took dresses, shawls, cloaks, capes, artificial flowers; Brigitte, as ever, displayed a patient gayety. We both of us travestied each other; she wanted to dress my hair herself; we had put on rouge and we had powdered ourselves; all that we needed for that had been found in an old casket which, I believe, came from the aunt. At last, after an hour's time, we no longer recognized each other. The evening was spent in singing, in imagining a thousand silly things; towards one o'clock in the morning, it was time for supper.

We had explored all the wardrobes; there was one near me that had remained open. On sitting down to take my place at table, I noticed on a shelf in it the book of which I have already spoken, in which Brigitte often wrote.

"Is it not the collection of your thoughts?" I asked as I extended my hand and took it. "If it is not an indiscretion, allow me to cast my eyes over it."

I opened the book, though Brigitte made a motion to prevent me from doing so ; on the first page I fell on these words : *This is my testament !*

Everything was written in a steady hand ; I found there first a faithful narrative, without bitterness and without anger, of all that Brigitte had suffered through me since she had been my mistress. She declared her firm determination to bear everything as long as I loved her and to die when I left her. Her arrangements were made ; she took account, day by day, of the sacrifice of her life. What she had lost, what she had hoped for, the frightful isolation in which she found herself even in my arms, the ever-growing barrier that was interposed between us, the cruelties with which I rewarded her love and her resignation ; all that was related without complaint ; on the contrary, she took it as a task to justify me. Finally, she reached the details of her personal affairs and regulated what regarded her heirs. It was by poison, she said, that she would put an end to her life. She would die of her own will, and expressly forbade that her memory should ever serve as a pretext for any proceeding against me. " Pray for him ! " such were her last words.

I found in the wardrobe, on the same shelf, a small box that I had already seen, full of a fine bluish powder, like salt.

" What is that ? " I asked Brigitte as I raised the box to my lips. She gave a terrible scream and threw herself on me.

“Brigitte,” I said to her, “bid me adieu. I take this box away; you will forget me and you will live, if you want to spare me a murder. I will leave this very night, and do not ask any pardon of you; you will grant me that, although God should not. Give me a last kiss.”

I leaned toward her and kissed her brow. “Not yet!” she exclaimed in anguish. But I pushed her back on the sofa and rushed out of the room.

Three hours later I was ready to leave, and the post-horses had arrived. Rain was still falling, and I groped my way into the carriage. At the same moment the postilion started; I felt two arms that were clasping my body and heard but a sob that died on my lips.

It was Brigitte. I did everything I could to prevail upon her to remain; I called out to stop; I told her all that I could imagine to persuade her to get out; I went even so far as to promise that I would one day return to her, when time and travel should have effaced the memory of the evil that I had done to her. I tried to prove to her that what had been yesterday would be again to-morrow; I repeated to her that I could only make her unhappy, that for her to cling to me was to make me an assassin. I used entreaty, oaths, even menace; she had only one answer for me: “You are going, take me; let us leave the country, let us leave the past. We can no longer live here, let us go elsewhere, whither you will; let us go and die in a corner

of the earth. We must be happy, I through you, you through me."

I embraced her with such transport that I believed I felt my heart breaking. "Start, then!" I called to the postilion. We threw ourselves into each other's arms, and the horses went off at a gallop.

PART FIFTH

PART FIFTH

I

Having settled on a long journey, we had come to Paris; the necessary preparations and the business to be attended to required some time, and it was necessary to take apartments in a furnished house for a month.

The resolve to leave France had changed the face of everything: joy, hope, confidence, all had returned at the same time; no more sorrow, no more quarrels in presence of the thought of early departure. We were occupied only with dreams of happiness, oaths of eternal love; I wanted, in fact, to make my dear mistress forever forget all the evils that she had suffered. How could I resist so many proofs of an affection so tender and a resignation so courageous? Not only did Brigitte

forgive me, but she got ready to make me the greatest sacrifice and to leave all to follow me. The more I felt myself unworthy of the devotion that she showed to me, the more I wanted my love in the future to reward her; at last my good angel had triumphed, and admiration and love gained the upper hand in my heart.

Leaning near me, Brigitte was looking on the map for the place whither we were going to bury ourselves; we had not yet decided on it, and we found in this uncertainty a pleasure so keen and so new that we feigned, so to say, not to be able to fix on anything. During these searches our brows were touching each other, my arm was around Brigitte's waist. "Whither shall we go? what shall we do? where will the new life begin?" How shall I tell what I felt when, amid so many hopes, I occasionally raised my head for a moment? What repentance penetrated me at the sight of that beautiful and tranquil countenance which was smiling at the future, still pale from the sorrows of the past! When I was holding her thus and her finger was wandering over the map, while she was speaking in a low voice of her affairs which she was arranging, of her desires, of our future retreat, I would have given my blood for her. Happiness anticipated, you are, perhaps, the only veritable happiness here below!

After about a week, during which our time was spent in running around and making small purchases, a young man presented himself at our house: he brought letters

to Brigitte. After the conversation that he had with her I found her sad and downcast ; but I was unable to learn anything else of it, except that the letters were from N——, that same town where, for the first time, I had spoken of my love, and where dwelt the only relatives whom Brigitte still had.

Our preparations, however, were being made rapidly, and there was room in my heart only for the impatience of starting ; at the same time, the joy that I felt left me scarcely a moment's rest. When I arose in the morning, and when the sun was shining through our windows, I felt such transports in me that I was as if intoxicated with them ; I then entered on tiptoe the room in which Brigitte was sleeping. More than once, on awaking, she found me on my knees at the foot of her bed, looking at her sleeping and not able to restrain my tears ; I knew not by what means to convince her of the sincerity of my repentance. If my love for my first mistress had made me commit follies of old, I now committed a hundred times more of them : everything strange and violent, which passion carried to excess can inspire, I sought most eagerly. It was a worship that I had for Brigitte, and, though her lover for over six months, it seemed to me, when I approached her, that I saw her for the first time ; I scarcely dared kiss the hem of the dress of that woman whom I had so long maltreated. Her slightest words made me bound, as if her voice had been new to me ; sometimes I threw myself into her

arms sobbing and sometimes I burst out laughing without reason ; I spoke of my past conduct only with horror and disgust, and I could have wished that there existed somewhere a temple dedicated to love, there to purify myself in a baptism and to cover myself with a distinguishing vestment that nothing could, henceforward, snatch from me.

I have seen Titian's St. Thomas, laying his finger on Christ's wound, and I have often thought of him : if I dared compare love to a man's faith in his God, I might say that I resembled him. What name is borne by the feeling expressed by that restless head, almost doubting still and already adoring ? He touches the wound ; astonished blasphemy stops on his open lips, on which prayer sweetly takes its place. Is he an apostle ? is he an impious man ? does he repent as much as he has offended ? Neither he, nor the painter, nor you who are looking at him, know anything about it ; the Saviour smiles, and everything is absorbed as a drop of dew, in a ray of the immense goodness.

It was thus that, in Brigitte's presence, I was mute and, as it were, incessantly surprised ; I trembled lest she preserved only fears and lest so many changes which she had seen in me would make her distrustful. But, after a fortnight, she had read clearly in my heart ; she understood that on seeing her sincere, I had become so in my turn, and, as my love came from her courage, she did not doubt the one any more than the other.

Our room was full of clothing in disorder, of albums, of crayons, of books, of packages, and over all that, ever spread out, the dear map that we loved so much. We were moving here and there; I stopped every moment to cast myself at Brigitte's knees, she treated me as a sluggard, saying laughingly that it was necessary for her to do everything and that I was good for nothing; and, while getting the trunks ready, plans proceeded as may be supposed. It was a far journey to reach Sicily; but the winter is so pleasant there! it is the finest of climates. Genoa is very beautiful with its painted houses, its green espalier gardens, and the Apennines behind it! But how much noise! What a multitude! Of every three men who pass in the streets, one is a monk and another a soldier. Florence is sad; it is the Middle Ages, still living in the midst of us. How bear those grated windows and that frightful brown color with which the houses are all daubed? What could we do in Rome? we do not travel to dazzle ourselves, and still less to learn nothing. If we went to the banks of the Rhine? but the season will be over there, and, though one is not in search of people, it is always sad to go where it happens that the place is deserted. But Spain? too many impediments would delay us there: it is necessary to move there as in war and to wait for everything, except rest. Let us go to Switzerland! if so many people travel there, let us leave the fools to make light of it; it is there, that bloom in all their

splendor, the three colors dearest to God : the azure of the heavens, the verdure of the plains, and the whiteness of the snows on the summit of the glaciers. "Let us leave, let us leave," said Brigitte, "let us fly like two birds. Let us picture to ourselves, my dear Octave, that it is since yesterday we have known each other. You met me at the ball, I pleased you, and I love you ; you tell me that a few leagues from here, I know not in what little town, you loved a Madame Pierson ; what has passed between you and her, I do not desire even to believe. Are you not going to confide to me your intrigues with a woman whom you have left for me ? I will whisper to you, in my turn, that it is not yet very long since I loved a bad character who made me rather unhappy ; you pity me, you impose silence on me, and it is agreed between us that it will never be discussed."

When Brigitte was speaking thus, what I felt resembled avarice ; I clasped her with trembling arms. "O God !" I exclaimed, "I know not whether it is joy or fear that makes me shudder. I am going to carry you off, my treasure. Before that immense horizon, you are mine ; we are going to leave. Perish my youth, perish memories, perish all care and regret ! O my good and noble mistress ! you have made a man of a child ! if I lost you now, never could I love. Perhaps, before knowing you, another woman might have been able to cure me ; but now, you are the only one in the world who can kill me or save me, for I bear in my

heart the wound of all the evil that I have done to you. I have been ungrateful, blind, and cruel. God be blessed! you love me still. If ever you return to the village in which I saw you under the lindens, look at that deserted house; there must be a ghost there, for the man who leaves it with you is not he who entered there."

"Is it indeed true?" said Brigitte; and her fine brow, all radiant with love, was then raised towards heaven—"is it indeed true that I am yours? Yes, far from that odious world that has aged you before your time, yes, child, you are going to love. I will have you such as you are, and, whatever be the corner of the earth to which we go to find life, you will there forget me, without remorse, the day on which you will cease to love. My mission will be fulfilled, and there will still remain a God on high to thank for it."

With what a poignant and frightful memory those words still fill me! At last, it was decided that we would go first to Geneva, and that we would choose at the foot of the Alps a quiet place for the spring. Brigitte was already speaking of the beautiful lake; already was I breathing in my heart the breath of the wind that agitates it and the enlivening odor of the green valley; already Lausanne, Vevey, the Oberland, and beyond the summits of Mount Rosa, the immense plain of Lombardy, forgetfulness, rest, flight, all the spirits of the happy solitudes were bidding us and inviting us;

already, when, in the evening, with joined hands, we looked at each other in silence, we felt arising in us that feeling, full of a strange grandeur, which takes possession of the heart on the eve of long journeys, a secret and inexplicable vertigo which at the same time partakes of the terrors of exile and of the hopes of pilgrimage. O God! it is Thy voice itself which then calls and which warns man that he must go to Thee. Are there not in human thought, wings that shudder and sonorous chords that stretch? What shall I say to you? is there not a world in these mere words: "Everything was ready, we were going to start?"

All of a sudden Brigitte becomes languid; she droops her head, she keeps silent. When I ask her if she is suffering, she tells me no, in a faint voice; when I speak to her of the day of departure, she arises, cold and resigned, and continues her preparations; when I swear to her that she is going to be happy, and that I purpose to devote my life to her, she shuts herself up to weep; when I embrace her, she becomes pale and turns away her eyes while extending her lips to me; when I tell her that nothing is yet done, that she can give up our plans, she knits her brow with a severe and wild air; when I entreat her to open her heart to me, when I repeat to her that, were I to die of it, I will sacrifice my happiness, if ever it is going to cost her a regret, she throws herself on my neck, then stops and pushes me away as if involuntarily. At last, I one day enter her room, holding

in my hand a ticket on which our seats are marked for the Besançon coach. I approach her, I lay it down on her knees, she extends her arms, utters a cry, and falls unconscious at my feet.

II

All my efforts to discover the cause of a change so unexpected had remained without result, like the questions that I had been able to put. Brigitte was ill, and obstinately kept silent. After a whole day, spent sometimes in entreating her to explain herself, sometimes in exhausting myself in conjectures, I had gone out without knowing whither I was going. On passing near the Opéra, an agent offered me a ticket, and mechanically I entered, as was my custom.

I could not pay attention to what was going on, either on the stage or in the audience: I was so crushed with grief and, at the same time so stupefied that, so to say, I lived only within myself, and external objects no longer seemed to strike my senses. All my concentrated strength was directed on one thought, and the more I turned it over in my head, the less clearly could I see into it. What frightful obstacle, suddenly interposed, was thus, on the eve of departure, upsetting so many plans and hopes? If an ordinary event or even a

veritable calamity, as of a change of fortune or of the loss of some friend were involved, why that obstinate silence? After all that Brigitte had done, at a moment when our most cherished dreams seemed near being realized, of what nature could a secret be that was destroying our happiness and that she refused to confide to me? What! it is from me that she is concealing herself! If her sorrows, her business, even fear of the future, or any cause of sadness, of uncertainty or of wrath, keep her here for some time or make her give up forever that journey so desired, why should she not be open with me? In the condition in which my heart was, I could not, however, suppose that there was anything to blame in that. The mere appearance of a suspicion was revolting and horrified me. Why, on the other hand, believe in inconstancy or in caprice merely in that woman such as I knew her? I was lost in an abyss, and did not even see the faintest glimmer, the slightest point that could fix my position.

There was in front of me, in the gallery, a young man whose features were not unknown to me. As often happens when one has his mind preoccupied, I was looking at him without taking account of it and I was trying to connect his name with his countenance. All of a sudden I recognized him: it was he who, as I have said above, had brought letters from N—— to Brigitte. I arose in a hurry to go and speak to him, without thinking of what I was doing. He occupied a

seat which I could not reach without disturbing a large number of spectators, and I was compelled to wait for an intermission.

My first impulse had been to think that, if any one could enlighten me on the only care that disturbed me, it was this young man rather than any one else. He had had several conversations with Madame Pierson during the past few days, and I remembered that, when he had left her, I had found her constantly sad, not only on the first day, but every time that he had come. He had seen her the previous day, the very morning of the day on which she had become ill. The letters that he brought, Brigitte had not shown to me ; it was possible that he knew the real reason that delayed our departure. Perhaps he was not entirely in the secret, but he could not fail to tell me at least what were the contents of those letters, and I must have supposed that he was sufficiently acquainted with our affairs for me not to be afraid to interrogate him. I was delighted at having found him, and, as soon as the curtain was lowered, I ran to join him in the lobby. I do not know whether he saw me coming, but he moved away and entered a box. I resolved to wait until he came out and remained a quarter of an hour walking, ever looking at the box door. It opened at last, he came out ; I saluted him at once from afar as I advanced to meet him. He took a few steps with an irresolute air ; then, turning suddenly, he went down the stairway, and disappeared.

My intention of approaching him had been too evident for him to be able to escape me thus without a formal design of avoiding me. He must have recognized my countenance, and moreover, even though he did not, a man who sees another coming to him ought at least to wait for him. We were alone in the lobby when I advanced towards him, so it was beyond doubt that he did not want to speak to me. I did not dream of seeing an impertinence in that : a man who came every day into a tenement in which I dwelt, to whom I had always given a good reception when I had met him, whose manners were simple and modest, how could I think that he wanted to insult me? He had wished only to shun me and to dispense with a disagreeable conversation. Why again? This second mystery disturbed me almost as much as the first. Whatever I did to remove this idea, that young man's disappearance was invincibly connected in my head with Brigitte's obstinate silence.

Uncertainty is of all torments the most difficult to bear, and on several occasions in my life I have exposed myself to great misfortunes for want of being able to wait patiently. When I returned home I found Brigitte reading just those fatal letters from N——, I told her that it was impossible for me to remain longer in the condition of mind in which I then was, and that, at any cost, I wanted to leave ; that I wished to know, whatever it might be, the reason for the sudden change

that had taken place in her, and that, if she declined to answer, I would regard her silence as a positive refusal to start with me, and even as an order to go away from her forever.

She showed me reluctantly one of the letters that she was holding. Her relatives wrote to her that her departure dishonored her forever, that no one was ignorant of its cause, and that they believed themselves obliged to declare to her in advance what would be its results; that she was living publicly as my mistress, and that, though she was free and a widow, she had yet to answer for the name that she bore; that neither they nor any of her former friends would see her again if she persisted; in fine, by all sorts of threats and advice, they entreated her to return to the country.

The tone of that letter made me indignant, and I saw in it at first only an insult. "And that young man who brings you these remonstrances," I exclaimed, "no doubt is charged to make them to you verbally, and he does not fail to do so, is not that true?"

Brigitte's deep sorrow made me reflect and calmed my wrath. "You will," she said to me, "do by me what you desire, and will complete my ruin. And so indeed my fate is in your hands, and it is a long time since you have been its master. Take such revenge as you please on the last effort that my old friends are making to recall me to reason, to the world, which I formerly respected, and to honor, which I have lost.

I have not a word to say, and, if you wish to dictate my answer, I will make it such as you desire."

"I desire nothing," I replied, "but to know your intentions; it is for me, on the contrary, to conform to them, and, I swear to you, I am ready to do so. Tell me whether you remain, whether you depart, or if it be necessary that I depart alone."

"Why this question?" Brigitte asked; "have I told you that I had changed my mind? I am suffering and cannot leave thus; but as soon as I shall be well or only in a condition to get up, we will go to Geneva, as has been agreed upon."

We separated at these words, and the mortal coldness in which she had spoken them saddened me more than a refusal would have done. It was not the first time that, by advice of this sort, they had tried to break off our companionship; but until now, whatever impression such letters had made on Brigitte, she had soon got rid of it. Why believe that this single motive had such influence on her to-day, when it had been of no avail in less happy times? I questioned whether, in my actions since we had been in Paris, I had done anything with which to reproach myself. "Can it be merely," I said to myself, "the weakness of a woman who has wanted to take an obstinate course and who, at the moment of carrying it out, recoils before her own will? Can it be what libertines would call a last scruple? But that gayety which a week ago Brigitte showed from

morning until evening, those plans so sweet, abandoned, resumed incessantly ! those promises, those protestations, all that, however, was frank, real, without any constraint. It was in spite of me that she wanted to start. No, there is some mystery in that ; and how know it, if now, when I question her, she pays me with a reason that cannot be the true one ? I cannot tell her that she is lying or compel her to give any other reply. She tells me that she is ever anxious to start ; but, if she says so in that tone, should I not absolutely refuse ? Can I accept such a sacrifice, when it is accomplished as a task, as a condemnation ? when what I believed to have been offered to me by love, I come, so to say, to demand it by pledged word ? O God ! is it then this pale and languishing creature that I would carry off in my arms ? Would I take away so far from the fatherland, for so long a time, for life perhaps, only a resigned victim ? I will do, she says, what is pleasing to you ! No, certainly, it will not please me to ask anything of patience, and, rather than see that countenance suffering for only another week, if she keeps silent, I will set out alone."

Madman that I was ! had I the strength for it ? I had been too happy for a fortnight past to dare truly to look backwards, and, far from feeling that I had such courage, I dreamt only of the means of taking Brigitte away. I spent the night without closing an eye, and next day, in the early morning, I resolved, at all hazards, to go to

the young man's house whom I had seen at the Opéra. I do not know whether it was wrath or curiosity that drove me thither, or what in reality I wanted of him ; but I thought that in this way he could not at least avoid me, and that was all that I desired.

As I did not know his address, I went to Brigitte's room to ask for it, pleading compliment that I owed him after all the visits that he had paid us ; for I had not said a word of my meeting at the theatre. Brigitte was in bed, and her wearied eyes showed that she had been weeping. When I entered, she reached out her hand and said to me : "What do you want of me ?" Her voice was sad, but tender. We exchanged a few amicable words, and I left with my heart less desolate.

The young man whom I was going to see was named Smith ; he lived a short distance away. On knocking at his door, an indescribable restlessness took hold of me ; I advanced slowly and as if suddenly struck by an unlooked-for light. At his first gesture, my blood froze. He was lying down, and, with the same tone as Brigitte had a little while ago, with a countenance as pale and as worn, he reached out his hand and said the same words : "What do you want of me ?"

One may think of it what one will ; there are chances in life that man's reason cannot explain. I sat down without being able to reply, and, as if I had awakened from a dream, I repeated to myself the question that he

addressed to me. What indeed had I come to do at his house? how tell him what brought me? Supposing that it could be useful to me to interrogate him, how was I to know whether he would speak? He had brought letters whose writers he knew, but did not I know of them to the same extent as he did, after what Brigitte had just shown me? It cost me the putting of questions to him, and I was afraid lest he would suspect what was passing through my heart. The first words that we exchanged were polite and insignificant. I thanked him for having taken charge of the messages for Madame Pierson's family; I told him that on leaving France we would entreat him in our turn to do us some services; after which we remained in silence, astonished at finding ourselves face to face with each other.

I looked around me, like people embarrassed. The room occupied by that young man was on the fifth floor; everything there betokened an honest and laborious poverty. A few books, musical instruments, white wooden frames, papers in order on a cloth-covered table, an old arm-chair and some other chairs, that was all; but everything betokened an air of cleanliness and of care that made of it an agreeable collection. As for himself, an open and animated countenance made a first impression in his favor. I noticed on the mantel-piece the portrait of an aged woman; I approached it in an entirely dreamy way, and he told me that it was his mother.

I then remembered that Brigitte had often spoken to me of him, and a thousand details that I had forgotten, returned to my memory. Brigitte had known him since his childhood. Before I came to the country she saw him sometimes at N——; but, since my arrival, she had gone there only once, and he was not there at that moment. It was only, then, by chance that I had learned some particulars concerning him, which, however, had struck me. He had as his only means a modest situation that enabled him to support a mother and a sister. His conduct towards these two women merited the highest praise; he deprived himself of everything for them, and though, as a musician, he possessed valuable talents which might lead to fortune, extreme probity and reserve had always made him prefer rest to the chances of success that had been presented to him. In a word, he was of that small number of beings who live without bustle and do others the favor of not noticing what they are worth.

I had been told of certain traits of his that suffice to paint a man: he had been very much in love with a beautiful girl of his neighborhood, and after more than a year's attention, consent was granted to give her to him as his wife. She was as poor as he was. The contract was going to be signed and everything was ready for the nuptials, when his mother said to him: "And your sister, who will marry her?" These few words gave him to understand that, if he took a wife, he would

spend for his housekeeping all that he would earn by his work, and that consequently his sister would have no dowry. He at once broke off all that had been begun and courageously gave up his marriage and his love ; it was then that he came to Paris and obtained the situation that he had.

I had never heard this story, of which people spoke in the country, without desiring to know its hero. That tranquil and obscure devotedness had seemed to me more admirable than all the glories of battlefields. On seeing his mother's portrait I remembered it at once, and, turning my gaze on him, I was astonished at finding him so young. I could not help asking him his age ; it was mine. Eight o'clock struck, and he arose.

At the first steps that he took I saw him falter ; he shook his head. "What ails you?" I said to him. He answered that it was the hour for going to the office, and that he did not feel strong enough to walk.

"Are you ill?"

"I have fever, and I am suffering cruelly."

"You felt better yesterday evening ; I saw you, I think, at the Opéra."

"Excuse me for not having recognized you. I have a pass to that theatre, and I hope to find you there again."

The more I examined that young man, that room, that house, the less I felt strength enough to approach the real object of my visit. The idea that I had had the

evening before, that he had been able to injure me in Brigitte's mind, vanished in spite of me ; I found in him an air of frankness and, at the same time, of severity that stopped me and imposed on me. Gradually my thoughts took another direction ; I looked at him attentively, and it seemed to me that on his part he was also observing me with curiosity.

We were both of us twenty-one, and what a difference between us ! He, habituated to an existence, the movements of which were determined by the regulated sound of a clock ; having never seen of life but the way from an isolated room to an office buried in a ministry ; sending to a mother the very savings, that mite of human joy which is clasped with so much avarice by every hand that works ; complaining of a night of suffering because it deprived him of a day of fatigue ; having but one thought, but one good, to watch over the well-being of another, and that from his childhood, since he had arms ! and I, with that valuable time, rapid, inexorable, with that time that absorbs the fruits of sweating labor, what had I done ? was I a man ? Which of us had lived ?

What I say there on one page, a look is necessary for us to feel. Our eyes had just met and did not leave each other. He spoke to me of my journey and of the country that we were going to visit.

"When do you set out ?" he asked me.

"I do not know ; Madame Pierson is suffering and has kept to her bed for three days."

“For three days!” he repeated with an involuntary impulse.

“Yes, what is there in it that astonishes you?”

He arose and threw himself on me, his arms extended and his eyes fixed. A terrible shudder made him start.

“Are you suffering?” I said to him as I took hold of his hand. But at the same instant he raised it to his face, and, not being able to suppress his tears, he dragged himself slowly to his bed.

I looked at him with surprise; the violent attack of his fever had broken him down all of a sudden. I hesitated to leave him in that state, and I approached him anew. He thrust me back forcibly and as if with a strange terror. When he at last returned to himself:

“Excuse me,” he said in a weak voice; “I am not in a condition to receive you. Be so good as to leave me; as soon as my strength will allow me, I will go and thank you for your visit.”

III

Brigitte was feeling better. As she had told me, she had wanted to leave as soon as she was well. But I was opposed to it, and we had to wait for a fortnight yet until she was in a condition to bear the journey.

Ever sad and silent, yet she was gentle. Whatever I did to get her to speak to me open-heartedly, the letter that she had shown to me was, she said, the only reason for her melancholy, and she entreated me that there be no further reference to it. Thus, reduced myself to keep silent like her, I vainly sought to see what was passing in her heart. Familiar talk was weighing on both of us, and we went to the theatre every evening. There, seated beside each other, in the end of a box, we sometimes pressed each other's hands; from time to time a fine piece of music, a word that struck us, made us exchange friendly looks; but, on going, as well as on returning, we remained mute, plunged in our thoughts. Twenty times a day I felt myself ready to throw myself at her feet and to ask her, as a favor, to give me the death-blow or to give me the happiness that I had glimpses of; twenty times, on the point of doing so, I saw her features change; she arose and left me, or, by an icy word, stopped my heart on my lips.

Smith came almost every day. Though his presence in the house had been the cause of all the evil, and though the visit that I had paid him had left singular suspicions in my mind, the manner in which he spoke of our journey, his good faith and his simplicity, reassured me about him. I had spoken to him of the letters that he had brought, and he had appeared to me not so much offended thereat, but more sad than I. He was ignorant of their contents, and the friendship of long standing

that he had for Brigitte made him blame them loudly. He would not have taken charge of them, he said, if he had known what they contained. By the reserved tone that Madame Pierson kept towards him, I could not believe that he was in her confidence. I saw him, then, with pleasure, though there was always between us a sort of stiffness and ceremony. He had undertaken to be, after our departure, the intermediary between Brigitte and her family and to prevent an open rupture. The esteem that people had for him in the country was not to be of small importance in this negotiation, and I could not help feeling kindly towards him for it. He was the noblest of characters. When we were all three together, if he noticed any coldness or any constraint, I saw him make every effort to bring back gayety between us ; if he seemed restless at what was going on, it was always without indiscretion and so as to give us to understand that he wished to see us happy ; if he spoke of our connection, it was, so to say, with respect and as a man to whom love was a bond, sacred in God's presence ; in short, he was a sort of friend, and he inspired me with full confidence.

But, notwithstanding all that and in spite of his own efforts, he was sad, and I could not overcome strange thoughts that took hold of me. The tears that I had seen that young man shed, his malady coming precisely at the same time as that of my mistress, and the thought that I discovered an indescribable, melancholy sympathy

between them, troubled and disturbed me. It was not a month since, on slighter suspicions, I would have had paroxysms of jealousy; but now, of what suspect Brigitte? Whatever might be the secret that she was concealing from me, was she not going to leave with me? Even, indeed, had it been possible that Smith was in the confidence of some mystery of which I was ignorant, of what nature could that mystery be? What could there have been that was blamable in their sadness and in their friendship? She had known him as a child; she saw him again after long years, just as she was leaving France; she found herself in an unfortunate position, and chance willed that he should be informed of it, that he should have served even in some manner as an instrument for her evil destiny. Was it not quite natural that they would exchange some sad looks, that the sight of that young man would recall the past to Brigitte, some memories and some regrets? Could he, in his turn, see her leave without fear, without thinking, in spite of himself, of the chances of a long journey, of the risks of a henceforward erring life, almost proscribed and abandoned? No doubt that was to be, and I felt, when I thought of it, that it was for me to arise, to put myself between them both, to reassure them, to make them believe in me, to say to the one that my arm would support her as long as she wished to be supported on it, to the other that I was grateful to him for the affection that he had shown us and for the services that

he was going to render us. I felt it and could not do it. A mortal cold pressed upon my heart, and I remained in my arm-chair.

When Smith had left in the evening, either we were silent, or we spoke of him. I do not know what odd attraction made me ask Brigitte every day for fresh details on his account. She had, however, to tell me about him only what I have said to the reader; his life had never been anything else but what it was, poor, obscure, and honest. To relate it entirely, few words sufficed; but I had them repeated to me incessantly, and without knowing why I took an interest in them.

On reflecting on them, there was at the bottom of my heart a secret suffering that I did not acknowledge. If that young man arrived at the moment of our joy, if he brought to Brigitte an unimportant letter, if he clasped her hand as she was going into the carriage, would I have paid the slightest attention to it? If he had recognized me or not at the Opéra, if tears, of whose cause I was ignorant, escaped from him in my presence, what mattered it to me, if I were happy? But, while not being able to see into the reason for Brigitte's sadness, I saw clearly that my past conduct, whatever she could say of it, was not now foreign to her sorrows. If I had been what I ought to have been for the past six months that we had been living together, nothing in the world, I knew, would have been able to trouble our love. Smith was only an ordinary man, but he was

good and devoted, his simple and modest qualities resembled large clear lines that the eye catches without difficulty and at first glance ; in a quarter of an hour one knew him, and he inspired confidence, if not admiration. I could not help saying to myself that, if he had been Brigitte's lover, she would have gone off gladly with him.

It was of my own will that I had delayed our departure, and already I repented of it. Brigitte also sometimes urged me : "What is stopping us?" she said ; "here I am well, everything is ready." What was stopping me indeed? I do not know.

Seated near the mantel-piece, I was fixing my eyes alternately on Smith and on my mistress. I saw both of them pale, serious, mute. I knew not why they were so, and in spite of myself I repeated that the cause was one and the same and that one secret only need be learned. But it was not one of those vague and weakly suspicions that had tormented me of old, it was an invincible, a fatal instinct. What strange creatures we are ! I was pleased to leave them alone and to abandon them at the fireside to go and dream on the quay, to lean on the parapet and to look at the water like an idler of the streets.

When they spoke of their sojourn at N—— and when Brigitte, almost playful, assumed a slight motherly tone to remind him of their days spent together, it seemed to me that I was suffering, and yet I took pleasure in it. I

put questions to them ; I spoke to Smith of his mother, of his occupations, of his plans. I gave him opportunity to show himself in a favorable light and I forced his modesty to reveal his merit to us. "You love your sister very much, is it not true?" I asked him. "When do you count on getting her married?" He told us, then, blushingly, that housekeeping cost a great deal, that the marriage would take place perhaps in two years, perhaps sooner, if his health permitted him some extra work that would bring him allowances ; that there was in the country a family in sufficiently easy circumstances whose eldest son was his friend ; that they were almost of the same mind, and that happiness might come one day, like rest, without dreaming of it ; that he had given up to his sister the small share of the inheritance which their father had left to them ; that his mother was opposed to it, but that he would hold to it in spite of her ; that a young man ought to live by his hands, whilst the existence of a girl was decided the day of her marriage. Thus gradually he unfolded to us his whole life and his whole soul, and I watched Brigitte listening to him. Then, when he arose to withdraw, I accompanied him as far as the door, and I remained there pensive, motionless, until the sound of his footsteps was lost on the stairway.

I then returned into my room, and I found Brigitte getting ready to undress. I greedily contemplated that charming body, those treasures of beauty, which so many times I had possessed. I looked at her combing

her long hair, knotting her kerchief, and turning around when her dress slipped to the floor, like a Diana who is entering the bath. She got into bed, I rushed to mine; it could not have occurred to my mind that Brigitte was deceiving me or that Smith was in love with her; I did not think either of watching them or of taking them by surprise. I did not take account of anything. I said to myself: "She is very pretty, and that poor Smith is an honest youth; they have both of them a great sorrow, and I also." That was breaking my heart and at the same time comforted me.

We had found on reopening our trunks that some trifles were still missing from it; Smith had taken it upon himself to provide them. He had an indefatigable activity, and he was gratified, he said, when one entrusted to him the care of some errands. As I was returning home one day, I saw him on the floor fastening a portmanteau. Brigitte was in front of a piano that we had rented by the week during our sojourn in Paris. She was playing one of those old airs into which she put so much expression and which had been so dear to me. I stopped in the anteroom near the door, which was open; each note entered into my soul: never had she sung so sadly and so holily.

Smith was listening with delight; he was on his knees, holding the buckle of the portmanteau. He pressed it, then let it fall, and looked at the clothes that he himself had just folded and covered with a white linen. The air

finished, he remained thus ; Brigitte, her hands on the key-board, was looking afar off at the horizon. I saw for the second time tears fall from the young man's eyes ; I was near shedding some myself, and, not knowing what was going on within me, I entered and reached out my hand to him.

"Were you there?" Brigitte asked. She started and seemed surprised.

"Yes, I was there," I replied to her. "Sing, my dear, I entreat you. Let me hear your voice once more !"

She began again without answering ; to her also it was a reminder. She saw my emotion, and Smith's also ; her voice changed. The last sounds, scarcely articulated, seemed to be lost in the heavens ; she arose and gave me a kiss. Smith was still holding my hand ; I felt him pressing it with force and convulsively ; he was as pale as death.

On another day, I had brought a lithographed album which represented several scenes in Switzerland. We all three of us looked at it, and, from time to time, when Brigitte found a view that pleased her, she stopped to observe it. There was one of them that appeared to her to surpass by far all the others, it was a landscape in the canton of Vaud, some distance from the Brigues road : a green valley planted with apple-trees, where cattle grazed in the shade ; in the distance, a village consisting of a dozen wooden houses scattered irregularly

through the meadow and terraced on the surrounding hills. In the foreground, a young girl, with a large straw hat on her head, was seated at the foot of a tree, and a farm-boy, standing in front of her, seemed to be showing her, with an iron-tipped staff in his hand, the road that he had traversed ; he was pointing to a winding path that was lost in the mountain. Above them appeared the Alps, and the picture was crowned by three summits covered with snow, tinted with the shades of the setting sun. Nothing was more simple, and at the same time nothing was more beautiful than that landscape. The valley resembled a lake of verdure, and the eye followed its contours with the most perfect tranquillity.

“ Shall we go there ? ” I said to Brigitte. I took a pencil and traced some lines on the print.

“ What are you doing ? ” she asked.

“ I am trying,” I said to her, “ whether with a little skill it would be necessary to make much change in this figure to make it resemble you. That young girl’s pretty head-dress would become you wonderfully, I think ; and might I not, if I succeeded, give to that fine mountaineer some resemblance to myself ? ”

This caprice seemed to please her ; and, at once taking hold of an eraser, she soon had effaced from the sheet the countenance of the boy and that of the girl. There I was making her portrait, and she wanted to try mine. The figures were very small, so that it was not

difficult ; it was agreed that the likenesses were striking, and it sufficed indeed to look at our features to find them there again. When we had laughed at it the book remained open, and, the servant having called me for some matter of business, I went out a few moments afterwards.

When I came back, Smith was leaning on the table and was looking at the print with so much attention that he did not notice that I had returned. He was absorbed in a deep reverie ; I resumed my place near the fire, and it was only after the first word that I addressed to Brigitte that he raised his head. He looked at both of us for a moment ; then he took leave of us in haste, and, as he was crossing the dining-room, I saw him strike his forehead.

When I caught by surprise these signs of grief, I arose and ran to shut myself up. “ Well ! what is it, then ? what is it, then ? ” I repeated. Then I joined my hands to supplicate — whom ? I know not ; perhaps my good angel, perhaps my evil destiny.

IV

My heart called out to me to leave, and yet I still delayed ; in the evening, a secret and bitter desire nailed me to my place. When Smith was to come, I

had no rest until I heard the sound of the bell. How happens it that there is in us an unaccountable liking for misfortune?

Each day a word, a rapid flash, a look, made me shudder; each day another word, another look, by a contrary impression, threw me into uncertainty. By what inexplicable mystery did I see both of them so sad? By what other mystery did I remain emotionless, like a statue, on looking at them, when on more than one similar occasion I had shown myself violent even to rage? I had not the strength to budge, I who had felt myself in love with those almost ferocious jealousies, as one sees them in the East. I passed my days in waiting, and I could not say what I was waiting for. I sat down in the evening on my bed and said to myself: "Let us see, let us think of that." I put my head between my hands, then I exclaimed: "It is impossible!" and I began again the following day.

In Smith's presence, Brigitte showed me more friendship than when we were alone. He came, one evening, just as we had exchanged some rather harsh words; when she heard his voice in the anteroom, she came and sat down on my knees. As for him, always quiet and sad, it seemed as if he was exercising a continual control over himself. His slightest movements were measured; he spoke little and slowly; but the sudden impulses that escaped from him were only the more striking by their contrast with his habitual reserve.

In the circumstance in which I found myself, can I ascribe to curiosity the impatience that was devouring me? What would I have answered if any one had come and said to me: "What matters it to you? you are quite curious." Perhaps, however, it was nothing else.

I remember that one day, at the Pont-Royal, I saw a man drowning. With some friends I took what is called a full course at the swimming-school, and we were followed by a boat in which were two master swimmers. It was in the height of summer; our boat had met another, so that there were over thirty of us under the great arch of the bridge. Suddenly, in the midst of us, a young man is seized with a stroke of apoplexy. I hear a cry and I turn round. I saw two hands that were in motion on the surface of the water, then everything disappeared. We plunged at once; it was in vain, and only after an hour they succeeded in drawing out the dead body, stuck under some floating wood.

The impression that I felt whilst I was plunging in the river will never leave my memory. I looked on all sides into the dark and deep masses of water that enveloped me with a dull murmur. As long as I could hold my breath, I always plunged deeper; then I returned to the surface, I exchanged a question with some other swimmer as disturbed as myself; then I returned to that human fishing. I was filled with horror and hope; the idea that I was, perhaps, going

to feel myself seized by two convulsive arms caused me unspeakable joy and terror ; and it was only when worn out with fatigue that I re-entered the boat.

When debauch does not brutalize a man, one of its necessary consequences is a strange curiosity. I have spoken above of what I had felt on my first visit to Desgenais. I will explain myself further.

Truth, the skeleton of appearances, requires that every man, whoever he may be, shall in his day and his hour touch his immortal bones at the bottom of some passing sore. That is called knowing the world, and experience is at that cost.

Now it happens that in the face of this trial some recoil affrighted ; others, weak and scared, remain vacillating like shadows. Some creatures, the best, perhaps, die of it at once. The greater number forget, and thus everything floats toward death.

But certain men, most certainly unhappy, neither recoil nor waver, neither die nor forget : when their turn comes to experience misfortune, otherwise called truth, they approach it with a firm step, extend the hand, and, horrible to relate ! are seized with love for the livid drowned one whom they have felt at the bottom of the water. They lay hold of him, feel him, hug him ; then they are intoxicated with the desire of knowing ; they no longer look at things but to see through them ; they no longer do anything but doubt and try ; they explore the world as spies of God ; their

thoughts are sharpened into arrows, and a lynx is born in their entrails.

Debauchees, more than all others, are exposed to this madness, and the reason for it is quite simple : on comparing ordinary life to a plane and transparent surface, debauchees, in rapid currents, at every moment touch bottom. On leaving a ball, for example, they go off to some place of ill fame. After having in the waltz pressed the modest hand of a virgin, and perhaps having made her tremble, they leave, they run, throw their cloak aside, and sit down at table rubbing their hands. The last phrase that they have just addressed to a pretty and honest woman is still on their lips : they repeat it as they burst out laughing. What am I saying? do they not, for a few pieces of silver, raise up that garment which constitutes modesty, the dress, that veil full of mystery, which seems itself to respect the being whom it embellishes, and surrounds her without touching her? What idea, then, ought they to form of the world? they find themselves there at each instant as comedians behind the scenes. Who more than they is habituated to that search of the bottom of things, and, if one may so speak, to those deep and impious gropings? See how they speak of everything : always in terms the most indecent, the grossest, the most abject ; those only appear to them as true ; everything else is but parade, convention, and prejudice. Do they relate an anecdote, do they give an account of what

they have experienced : always the dirty and physical word, always the letter, always death ! They do not say : "That woman has loved me ;" they say : "I have had that woman ;" they do not say : "I love ;" they say : "I desire ;" they never say : "May God grant it !" they say everywhere : "If I desire !" I do not know what they think of themselves and what soliloquies they hold.

Whence, inevitably, either slothfulness or curiosity ; for, whilst they are thus exercising themselves in seeing in everything the worst that is, they none the less intend that others should continue believing in the good. They must needs, then, be heedless even to stuffing their ears, or until that noise of the rest of the world comes to wake them up with a start. The father lets his son go where so many others go, where Cato himself went ; he says that youth slips away. But, on returning, the son looks at his sister ; and see what an hour spent familiarly with brute reality produces in him ! it must be that he says to himself : "My sister is in no respect like that creature whom I have left !" and from that day see how restless he is.

The curiosity of evil is an infamous malady that is born of every impure contact. It is the prowling instinct of ghosts that raises the stone from the tombs ; it is an inexplicable torture with which God punishes those who have failed ; they would like to believe that everything can fail, and they would perhaps be distressed

thereat. But they inquire, they seek, dispute ; they lean their heads to one side, like a builder who is adjusting a square, and strive thus to see what they desire. The evil being proved, they smile at it ; the evil being doubtful, they would swear at it ; the good, they want to see behind. Who knows ? that is the great formula, the first word that Satan spoke when he saw heaven shut. Alas ! how many unhappy men have used this same expression ! how many disasters and deaths, how many terrible sweeps with the scythe in harvests ready to bloom ! how many hearts, how many families in which there is no longer anything but ruins since that word has been heard there ! Who knows ? who knows ? an infamous expression ! Rather than pronounce it, one should do like sheep, who know not where the slaughter-house is and who go there browsing on grass. That is better than being a free-thinker and reading La Rochefoucauld.

What better example could I give of it than what I am relating at this moment ? My mistress wanted to start, and I had only to say a word. I saw her sad, and why did I remain ? what would have come of it if I had left ? It would have been only a moment's fear ; we would not have traveled three days before all would have been forgotten. Alone with her, she would have thought only of me ; what mattered it to me to learn a mystery that did not attack my happiness ? She consented, everything ended there. All that was necessary

was a kiss on her lips ; instead of that, see what I am doing.

One evening on which Smith had dined with us, I withdrew early and left them together. As I was closing my door, I heard Brigitte asking for tea. Next day, on entering her room, I approached the table by chance, and, beside the teapot, I saw only a single cup. No one had entered before me, and, consequently, the servant had carried nothing away of what had been made use of the evening before. I looked around me on the furniture to see whether I could find a second cup, and assured myself that there was none.

“Did Smith stay late?” I asked Brigitte.

“He remained until midnight.”

“Did you go to bed alone, or did you call some one to put you to bed?”

“I went to bed alone ; everybody was asleep in the house.”

I was still searching, and my hands were trembling. In what burlesque comedy is there a simpleton jealous enough to go and inquire what has become of a cup? In relation to what should Smith and Madame Pierson have drunk out of the same cup? What a noble thought came to me in that !

I was holding the cup, however, and I was moving here and there through the room. I could not help breaking into laughter, and I hurled it on the floor. It

was broken into a thousand pieces, which I crushed under my heel.

Brigitte saw me doing this without saying a single word to me. During the two following days she treated me with a coldness that had the appearance of holding me in contempt, and I saw her affect towards Smith a freer and kindlier tone than ordinary. She called him Henri, his baptismal name, and smiled on him in a familiar way.

"I am anxious to take an airing," she said after dinner; "are you going to the Opéra, Octave? I am in a mood to go there on foot."

"No, I stay here; go there without me."

She took Smith's arm and left. I remained alone the whole evening; I had paper before me, and I wanted to write so as to fix my thoughts, but I could not get myself down to it.

As a lover, as soon as he sees himself alone, takes from his bosom a letter from his mistress and buries himself in a cherished dream, so I plunged with pleasure into the feeling of a profound solitude and I shut myself up in order to doubt. I had in front of me the two empty seats that Smith and Brigitte had just occupied; I looked at them with a greedy eye, as if they might be able to tell me something. I revolved a thousand times in my head what I had seen and heard; from time to time I went to the door and cast my eyes on our trunks, which were arranged against the wall and

which were waiting for a month past; I opened them gently, I examined the clothing, the books, arranged in order by those careful and delicate little hands; I listened to the carriages passing; their noise made my heart palpitate. I spread out on the table our map of Europe, but lately the witness of such sweet projects; and there, in the very presence of all my hopes, in that room in which I had conceived them and seen them so near to being realized, I gave myself up with free heart to the most frightful presentiments.

How was that possible? I felt neither wrath nor jealousy, and yet an unbounded sorrow. I did not suspect, and yet I doubted. So odd is man's mind that he knows how to forge for himself, with what he sees and in spite of what he sees, a hundred subjects of suffering. In truth, his brain resembles those cells of the Inquisition in which the walls are covered with so many instruments of torture that one understands neither their object nor their form, and that one asks, on seeing them, if they are pincers or playthings. Tell me, I ask you, what difference there is between one saying to his mistress: "All women deceive," and saying to her: "You are deceiving me?"

What was passing through my head was, however, perhaps as subtle as the finest sophism; it was a sort of dialogue between mind and conscience. "If I lost Brigitte?" said the mind.—"She is going away with you," said the conscience.—"If she was deceiving

me?"—"How would she deceive you, she who had made her will, in which she recommended that prayers be said for you!"—"If Smith loved her?"—"Madman, what matters it to you, since you know that it is you whom she loves?"—"If she loves me, why is she sad?"—"That is her secret, respect it."—"If I take her away, will she be happy?"—"Love her, she will be so."—"Why, when that man looks at her, does she seem afraid to meet his eyes?"—"Because she is a woman and because he is young."—"Why does that man, when she looks at him, turn pale all of a sudden?"—"Because he is a man and because she is pretty."—"Why, when I went to see him, did he throw himself weeping into my arms? why, one day, did he strike his brow?"—"Do not ask what it is necessary that you be ignorant of."—"Why is it necessary that I be ignorant of these things?"—"Because you are wretched and fragile, and because every mystery is God's."—"But why is it that I suffer, why cannot I think of that without my soul being terrified?"—"Think of your father and do good."—"But why can I not do it? why does evil attract me to it?"—"Get down on your knees and make your confession; if you believe in evil, you have done it."—"If I have done it, was it my fault? why did goodness betray me?"—"Because you are in darkness, is that a reason for denying light? if there are traitors, why are you one of them?"—"Because I am afraid of being duped."

“Why do you spend your nights awake? The new-born are asleep at that hour. Why are you alone now?”—
“Because I am thinking, I am doubting, and I am afraid.”—“When, then, will you make your prayer?”—
“When I shall believe. Why have they lied to me?”—
“Why do you lie, you coward! at this very moment? Why do you not die if you cannot suffer?”

Thus spoke and groaned in me two terrible and contrary voices, and a third still called out: “Alas! alas! my innocence! alas! alas! the days of old!”

V

What a frightful lever is human thought! it is our defence and our safeguard, the finest present that God has made to us. It is ours and obeys us; we can hurl it into space, and, once outside this weak cranium, we have done with it, we are no longer answerable for it.

As long as I was, from day to day, continually putting off that departure, I was losing strength and sleep, and little by little, without my noticing it, all my life was abandoning me. When I sat down at table, I felt in me a mortal disgust; at night, those two pale countenances, that of Smith and that of Brigitte, which I was watching as long as day lasted, followed me into frightful dreams. When they went in the evening to the

theatre, I refused to go there with them ; then I betook myself thither on my own account, I concealed myself in the pit, and thence I looked at them. I feigned to have business in the adjoining room and I stayed there an hour to listen to them. Sometimes the idea of picking a quarrel with Smith and of forcing him to fight me, laid violent hold of me ; I turned my back to him while he was speaking to me ; then I saw him with an air of surprise coming to me and offering me his hand. Sometimes, when I was alone at night and when every one was asleep in the house, I felt myself tempted to go to Brigitte's secretary and to take her papers from it. Once I was obliged to go out so as to resist it. What can I say ? One day, with a knife in my hand, I wished to threaten to kill them if they did not tell me the reason of their sadness ; another day, it was against myself that I wanted to turn my rage. With what shame I write it ! And should any one have asked me for the cause of my acting thus, I should not have known what answer to give.

To see, to know, to doubt, to spy, to be restless and to make myself miserable, to spend the day with my ear on the alert, and the night bathed in tears, to repeat to myself that I was dying of grief and to believe that I had cause for it, to feel isolation and weakness tearing up hope by the roots from my heart, to imagine that I was spying, while I was listening in the shade only to the beating of my feverish pulse ; unendingly to go over

those insipid phrases that are current everywhere :
“Life is a dream, there is nothing stable here below ;”
in fine, to curse, to blaspheme God in me, by my
wretchedness and my caprice : that is what my enjoy-
ment was, the dear occupation for which I gave up love,
the air of heaven, liberty !

Eternal God, liberty ! yes, there were certain moments when, in spite of everything, I still thought of it. In the midst of so much madness, oddity, and stupidity, there were boundings in me that all of a sudden took me away from myself. It was a gust of air that struck against my face when I went out of my cell ; it was a page of a book that I was reading, when, however, it happened to me to take up others than those of these modern sycophants whom people call pamphleteers, and against whom people ought to be on their guard, as a mere measure of public safety, to tear to pieces and to treat as philosophasters. Since I am speaking of those good moments that were so rare, I want to mention one of them. One evening I was reading Constant’s memoirs ; I found in them the following ten lines :

“Salsdorf, a Saxon surgeon attached to Prince Christian, had his limb broken by a shell at the battle of Wagram. He was lying in the dust almost lifeless. Fifteen paces away from him Amadeus of Kerburg, aide-de-camp—I have forgotten to whom—bruised in the breast by a bullet, falls and vomits blood. Salsdorf

sees that, if succor is not brought to this young man, he is going to die of apoplexy ; he gathers up his strength, drags himself crawling to him, bleeds him, and saves his life. On leaving there, Salsdorf dies at Vienna, four days after the amputation."

When I read these words, I threw down the book and melted into tears. I do not regret them, they were worth a good day to me ; for I did nothing but speak of Salsdorf, and cared for nothing else whatever. I did not think, for a certainty, of suspecting any one that day. Poor dreamer ! should I then remember that I had been good ? Of what service was that to me ? to stretch out desolate arms towards Heaven, to ask myself why I was in the world and to look around me to see whether some shell would not also fall that would free me for eternity. Alas ! it was only the lightning flash that crossed through my night for an instant.

Like those mad dervishes who find ecstasy in vertigo, when thought, turning on itself, has become exhausted from digging into itself, weary of a useless toil, it stops in affright. It seems that man is empty, and that, by force of going down into himself, he reaches the last step of a spiral staircase. There, as on the mountain summits, as in the depths of mines, air is wanting, and God forbids him to go farther. Then, stricken with a mortal cold, the heart, as if affected by forgetfulness, would like to escape from its bondage in order to be

born again ; he asks life of what surrounds him, he breathes the air ardently ; but he finds around him only his own chimeras which he has just animated with the strength that is wanting to him, and which, created by him, surround him like pitiless spectres.

It was not possible that matters should long continue thus. Worn out by uncertainty, I resolved to make a trial in order to discover the truth.

I went to order post-horses for ten o'clock in the evening. We had hired a calèche, and I gave instructions that everything be ready for the hour appointed. At the same time I forbade that anything be said of it to Madame Pierson. Smith came to dinner ; on taking my seat at table I affected more gayety than ordinarily, and, without signifying my intention to them, I turned the conversation on our journey. I would give it up, I said to Brigitte, if I thought that she had it less at heart ; I found myself so well at Paris that I did not ask better than to stay there as long as she found it agreeable. I bestowed praise on all the pleasures that one could have only in this city ; I spoke of balls, of the theatre, of so many opportunities for distraction that are there to be met with at every turn. In short, since we were happy, I did not see why we should change places ; and I did not dream of setting out so soon.

I expected that she was going to insist on our plan of going to Geneva, and indeed she did not fail to do so. It was, however, but rather feebly ; but, as soon as she

had said the first words about it, I feigned to yield to her insistence ; then, changing the conversation, I spoke of indifferent matters, as if everything had been agreed upon.

“And why,” I added, “should not Smith come along with us? It is quite true that he has occupations which keep him here ; but can he not get a leave of absence? Moreover, should not the talents that he possesses, and of which he does not wish to take advantage, assure to him a free and honorable existence anywhere? Let him come without ceremony ; the coach is large, and we offer him a place. It is necessary that a young man should see the world, and there is nothing so sad at his age as to be shut up in a narrow circle. Is it not true?” I asked Brigitte. “Come, my dear, let your credit obtain from him what he would perhaps refuse to me ; persuade him to sacrifice six weeks of his time to us. We will travel together, and a tour in Switzerland with us will make him find more pleasure in his office and his work.”

Brigitte joined with me, though she well knew that this invitation was only a pleasantry. Smith could not absent himself from Paris without danger of losing his place, and he answered us, not without regret, that this reason prevented him from accepting. However, I had a bottle of good wine brought up, and, while continuing to press him, half-laughingly, half-seriously, we were all three of us animated. After dinner, I went out for a quarter of an hour to make sure that my orders were

carried out ; then I returned with a joyous air, and, sitting down at the piano, I proposed to have some music. "Let us spend our evening here," I said to them ; "if you approve, let us not go to the theatre ; I am not capable of aiding you, but I can listen to you. We will get Smith to play if he is bored, and the time will pass more quickly than elsewhere."

Brigitte did not require to be entreated, she sang with good grace ; Smith accompanied her with his violoncello. The ingredients to make punch had been brought, and ere long the flame of burning rum made us gay with its light. The piano was abandoned for the table ; they returned to it ; we took up cards ; everything went on as I wanted, and it was a question only of diversion.

I had my eyes fixed on the clock, and I was impatiently waiting for the hand to mark ten. Restlessness was devouring me, but I had the strength to let no sign of it escape. At last the moment fixed upon arrived : I heard the postilion's whip and the horses entering the courtyard. Brigitte was seated near me ; I took hold of her hand and asked her if she was ready to leave. She looked at me in surprise, no doubt thinking that I was jesting. I said to her that at dinner she had appeared to me so clearly decided that I had not hesitated to have the horses brought, and that it was to order them that I had gone out. At the same instant the house-boy entered, coming to tell us that the packages were on the coach and that they were only waiting for us.

"Are you serious?" Brigitte asked; "you want to leave to-night?"

"Why not," I answered, "since we are agreed that we ought to leave Paris?"

"What! now? at this very instant?"

"Undoubtedly; is it not a month since everything has been ready? you see that they have only had the trouble of strapping our trunks on the calèche; from the moment it is decided that we do not remain here, is it not better to leave as soon as possible? I am of the opinion that it is necessary to do everything thus and to defer nothing until to-morrow. You are this evening in a traveling mood, and I make haste to take advantage of it. Why wait and defer continually? I could not bear this life. Is it not true that you want to leave? well, let us leave, it now only depends upon you."

There was a moment's deep silence. Brigitte went to the window and saw that the horses were hitched. Moreover, from the tone in which I spoke, there could no longer remain any doubt, and, however prompt this resolve must have appeared to her, it was from her that it came. She could not unsay her own words or make a pretext of any motive for delay. Her determination was taken at once; she first put some questions as if to make sure that everything was in order; seeing that nothing had been omitted, she looked about from side to side. She took her shawl and her hat, then put them on, then looked again. "I am ready," she said, "here

I am ; we are leaving, then? we are going to start?" She took a light, visited my room, her own, and opened the boxes and the wardrobes. She asked for the key of her secretary which she had lost, she said. Where could that key be? She had it an hour ago. "Come, come, I am ready," she repeated with extreme agitation ; "let us leave, Octave, let us go down." While saying that she was still looking and came and sat down beside us.

I had remained on the lounge and was looking at Smith standing in front of me. He had not changed countenance, and seemed neither troubled nor surprised ; but two drops of perspiration were running down his temples, and I heard an ivory counter which he was holding, crack between his fingers, and the pieces fall to the floor. He extended both his hands to us at the same time. "A pleasant journey, my friends!" he said.

Renewed silence ; I was ever observing him, and I was waiting for him to add a word. "If there is a secret here," I thought, "when shall I know it, if not at this moment? They must both of them have it on their lips. Let but the shadow of it appear, and I will seize it."

"My dear Octave," said Brigitte, "where do you expect that we shall stay? You will write to us, Henri, will you not? you will not forget my family, and you will do whatever you can for me?"

He answered with emotion, but with apparent calm, that he pledged himself with all his heart to serve her and that he would exert his efforts to do so. "I cannot answer for anything," he said, "and regarding the letters that you have received, there is very little hope. But it will not be my fault if, in spite of everything, I cannot soon send you some good news. Count on me, I am devoted to you."

After having further addressed a few obliging words to us, he got ready to leave. I arose and went ahead of him; I wanted for the last time to leave them for another moment together, and as soon as I had closed the door behind me, in all the rage of baffled jealousy, I pressed my brow against the lock.

"When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"Never," Brigitte replied; "adieu, Henri." She extended her hand to him. He leaned down, raised it to his lips, and I had only time to throw myself back into the darkness. He passed out without seeing me and left.

Left alone with Brigitte, I felt my heart desolate. She was waiting for me, her cloak under her arm, and the emotion which she felt was too obvious to be mistaken about it. She had found the key which she was looking for, and her secretary was open. I returned and sat down beside the fireplace.

"Listen," I said, without daring to look at her; "I have been so guilty towards you that I ought to wait

and suffer without having the right to complain. The change that has taken place in you has cast me into such despair that I have not been able to keep from asking you the reason for it ; but to-day I no longer ask it of you. Does it pain you to leave ? tell me ; I will be resigned."

"Let us start ; let us start !" she replied.

"As you will ; but be frank. Whatever be the blow that I receive, I must not even ask whence it comes ; I will submit to it without a murmur. But if I must ever lose you, do not give me back hope ; for, God knows ! I should not survive it."

She turned around precipitately. "Speak to me," she said, "of your love, do not speak to me of your sorrow."

"Well, I love you more than my life ! Compared with my love, my sorrow is only a dream. Come with me to the end of the world, either I will die, or I will live by you !"

While pronouncing these words I took a step towards her and I saw her grow pale and recoil. She made a vain effort to force her contracted lips to smile ; and, stooping down over the secretary : "An instant," she said, "an instant more ; I have some papers to burn." She showed me the letters from N——, tore them up and threw them into the fire ; she took others, which she reread and which she spread out on the table. They were bills from her dealers, and there were some of them

in the number that had not yet been paid. While examining them, she began to speak with volubility, her cheeks burning as in a fever. She asked pardon of me for her obstinate silence and for her conduct since her arrival. She showed me more tenderness, more confidence than ever. She clapped her hands, laughing, and promised herself the most charming journey; in fine, she was all love, or at least all semblance of love. I cannot say how much I was suffering from that factitious joy; there was in that sorrow which was thus belying itself, a sadness more frightful than tears and more bitter than reproaches. I should have preferred her cold and indifferent rather than thus excitedly striving to conquer herself; it seemed to me that I beheld a travesty of our most happy moments. It was the same words, the same woman, the same caresses; and that which, only a fortnight previously, was intoxicating me with love and with happiness, thus repeated, gave me horror.

“Brigitte,” I said to her all of a sudden, “what mystery, then, are you concealing from me? If you love me, what horrible comedy, then, are you thus playing before me?”

“I!” she said, almost offended. “What makes you believe that I am acting a part?”

“What makes me believe it? Tell me, my dear, that you have death in your soul and that you are suffering martyrdom. Behold my arms ready to receive you;

rest your head there and weep. Then I will take you away, perhaps ; but in truth, not thus."

"Let us start, let us start !" she repeated again.

"No, on my soul ! no, not at present, no, so long as there is a lie or a mask between us. I prefer misfortune to that gayety." She remained mute, in consternation at seeing that I was not deceived by her words and that I saw through her in spite of her efforts.

"Why deceive ourselves?" I continued. "Have I, then, fallen so low in your estimation that you can feign in my presence? This unfortunate and sad journey you believe yourself, then, condemned to? Am I a tyrant, an absolute master? am I an executioner who is dragging you to punishment? What, then, do you fear from my wrath, that you have recourse to such subterfuges? What terror makes you lie so?"

"You are wrong," she replied ; "I entreat you, not a word more."

"Why, then, so little sincerity? If I am not your confidant, can I not at least be treated as a friend? if I cannot know whence come your tears, can I not at least see them flow? Have you not even that confidence of believing that I respect your sorrows? What have I done to be left in ignorance of them? could not some remedy be found there?"

"No," she said, "you are wrong ; you would work your own misfortune and mine if you pressed me further. Is it not enough that we start?"

“And how would you have me set out when it suffices to look at you in order to see that this journey is repugnant to you, that you go unwillingly, that you are already repenting of it? What is it, then, great God! and what are you concealing from me? What is the use of playing with words, when the thought is as clear as that glass there? Should I not be the lowest of men to accept thus, without a murmur, what you are giving to me with so much regret? Yet how should I refuse it? what can I do if you do not speak?”

“No, I am not following you against my inclinations; you are mistaken; I love you, Octave; cease to torment me thus.”

She put so much sweetness into her words that I threw myself at her knees. Who could have resisted her look and the divine character of her voice? “My God!” I exclaimed, “you love me, Brigitte? my dear mistress, you love me?”

“Yes, I love you, yes, I belong to you; do with me as you will. I will follow you; let us go off together; come, Octave, they are waiting for us.” She clasped my hand in both hers and gave me a kiss on the forehead. “Yes, it must be so,” she murmured; “yes, I mean it, even to the last breath.”

“*It must be so?*” I said to myself. I arose. There remained on the table but a single sheet of paper which Brigitte was glancing over. She took it up, turned it over, then let it fall to the floor. “Is that all?” I asked.

“Yes, that is all.”

When I had had the horses brought, it had not been with the thought that we should indeed set out. I wanted only to make a trial; but, by the very force of the circumstances, it had become a reality. I opened the door. “It must be so!” I said to myself; “it must be so!” I repeated quite loud. “What does this expression mean, Brigitte? what is there here, then, of which I am ignorant? Explain yourself; if not, I stay. Why must it be that you love me?”

She fell on the lounge and wrung her hands in sorrow. “Ah! unfortunate, unfortunate man!” she said, “you will never know how to love!”

“Well, perhaps, yes, I believe so; but, before God, I know how to suffer. It is necessary that you love me, is it not? well, it needs be also that you answer me. Even should I have to lose you forever, even should these walls crumble over my head, I will not leave here until I know what this mystery is which has been torturing me for a month past. You shall speak, or I leave you. Let me be a fool, a madman, let me spoil my life at will, let me ask you what perhaps I ought to feign to want to be ignorant of, let an explanation between us destroy our happiness and raise henceforward before me an insurmountable barrier, let me in that way make impossible this very departure which I have so much wished; whatever it may cost you and me, you shall speak, or I give up everything.”

“No, no, I will not speak.”

“You shall speak ! Do you think, perchance, that I am a dupe of your lying? When I see you from evening until the next day more different from yourself than day is from night, do you think, then, that I am deceived about it? When you give me as a reason some letters that are not worth merely the trouble of reading, do you imagine that I am satisfied with the first pretext that comes, because it pleases you not to look for another? Is your countenance of plaster, so that it is difficult to see on it what is passing in your heart? What opinion, then, have you of me? I do not deceive myself so much as people think, and take care lest for want of words your silence does not tell me what you are so obstinately concealing.”

“What do you mean that I am concealing from you?”

“What do I mean! you ask me that! Is it to brave me to my face that you put this question to me? is it to drive me to extremes and to get rid of me? Yes, most certainly, offended pride is there, which is waiting for me to break out. If I explained myself frankly, you would have every feminine hypocrisy at your service; you are waiting until I accuse you, in order to answer me that a woman like you does not condescend to justify herself. In what looks of disdainful pride do not the most guilty and the most perfidious know how to envelop themselves! Your great weapon is silence; it is

not of yesterday that I know it. You wish only to be insulted, you are silent until one comes to that; come, come, struggle with my heart; where yours beats, you will find it; but do not struggle with my head, it is harder than iron and it holds out as long as you!"

"Poor boy!" Brigitte murmured, "you do not want to go, then?"

"No! I leave only with my mistress, and you are not so now. I have struggled enough, I have suffered enough, I have tortured my heart sufficiently. It is time that day should dawn; I have lived enough in night. Yes, or no, will you answer?"

"No."

"As you please; I will wait."

I went and sat down at the other end of the room, determined on getting up only when I had learned what I wanted to know. She appeared to reflect and walked haughtily in front of me.

I followed her with a greedy eye, and the silence that she kept by degrees increased my wrath. I did not want her to notice it, and knew not what course to take. I opened the window. "Let the horses be unharnessed," I called, "and let them be paid for! I shall not leave this evening."

"Poor unhappy man!" said Brigitte. I quietly closed the window again and sat down without appearing to have heard her; but I felt so keen an anger that I could not resist it. That cold silence, that negative

force, were exasperating me to the last degree. I should have been really deceived and sure of the treason of a loved woman, had I felt nothing worse. As soon as I was myself condemned to still remain in Paris, I said to myself that at any price it was necessary for Brigitte to speak. In vain did I seek in my head for a way of obliging her to do so; but, to find it at the very instant, I would have given all that I possessed. What was I to do? what to say? She was there, quiet, looking at me sadly. I heard the horses unharnessed; they went away at a slow trot, and the sound of their bells was soon lost in the streets. I had only to turn round for them to come back, and yet it seemed to me that their departure was irrevocable. I pushed the bolt of the door; I do not know what said in my ear: "There you are alone, face to face with the being who is to give you life or death."

Whilst, lost in my thoughts, I was trying to invent a course that would bring me back to the truth, I remembered a romance by Diderot, in which a woman, jealous of her lover, bethinks herself of a rather singular means to throw light on her doubts. She told him that she no longer loved him and announced to him that she was going to leave him. The Marquis des Arcis—that is the lover's name—walks into the trap and acknowledges that he is himself weary of his love. This odd scene, which I had read when too young, had struck me as an artifice, and the memory that I had kept of it

made me smile at that moment. "Who knows?" I said to myself, "if I did likewise, Brigitte would, perhaps, be deceived thereby and would tell me what her secret is."

From furious wrath, I passed all of a sudden to ideas of trickery and knavery. Was it, then, so difficult to make a woman speak in spite of herself? That woman was my mistress; I was quite weak if I did not succeed in it. I threw myself on the sofa with a free and indifferent air. "Well, my dear," I said pleasantly, "we are not, then, at the day of confidences."

She looked at me with an air of astonishment.

"Well! my God, yes," I continued, "it must be, however, that some day or other we shall reach a mutual understanding. See, to set you the example, I have some desire to begin; that will make you confident, and there is nothing like an understanding between friends."

Undoubtedly, in speaking thus, my countenance betrayed me; Brigitte did not seem to hear me and continued walking.

"Do you know, indeed," I said to her, "that after all it is six months that we have been together? The sort of life that we are leading has nothing that resembles that at which one may laugh. You are young, I am so likewise; if it happened that the intimacy ceased to be to your taste, would you be woman enough to say so to me? In truth, if that was so, I would acknowledge

it to you frankly. And why not? is it a crime to love? it cannot, then, be a crime to love less, or to love no longer. What would there be astonishing at our age in desiring a change?"

She stopped. "At our age!" she said. "Is it to me that you address yourself? What comedy are you also playing?"

The blood mounted to my face. I seized her hand. "Be seated there," I said to her, "and listen to me."

"What is the use? it is not you who are speaking."

I was ashamed of my own pretence, and I gave it up.

"Listen to me!" I repeated emphatically, "and come, I entreat you, and sit down here beside me. If you want to keep silent, do me at least the favor of listening to me."

"I am listening, what have you to say to me?"

"If any one said to me to-day: 'You are a dastard!' I am twenty-two and I am already beaten; my whole life, my heart would revolt. Would I not have in me the consciousness of what I am? It would be necessary, however, to go out on the meadow, it would be necessary for me to face the first comer, it would be necessary to stake my life against his; why? To prove that I am not a dastard; without which the world would believe him. This single word requires this response, every time that one has pronounced it and no matter who."

"It is true; how far do you want to go with it?"

“Women do not fight ; but, as society is constituted, there is, however, no being, of either sex, who ought not, at certain moments of life, were it regulated like a clock, solid as iron, see everything put to the test. Reflect ; whom do you see escape from this law ? some persons, perhaps ; but see what comes of it : if it is a man, dishonor ; if it is a woman, what ? forgetfulness. Every being who lives a true life ought on that very account to give proof that he lives. There is, then, for a woman, as well as for a man, an occasion on which she is attacked. If she is brave, she rises up, makes her presence known, and sits down. A stroke of a sword proves nothing for her. Not only is it necessary that she defend herself, but that she herself forge her weapons. People suspect her ; who ? an indifferent person ? she can and ought to despise him. Is it her lover, does she love him, that lover ? if she loves him, therein is her life, she cannot despise him.”

“ Her only answer is silence.”

“ You are mistaken ; the lover who suspects her, offends thereby against her whole life, I know it ; what answers for her, is it not her tears, her past conduct, her devotedness and her patience ? What will become of him if she be silent ? that her lover will lose her by his own fault and that time will justify her. Is not that your thought ? ”

“ Perhaps ; silence above all.”

“Perhaps, do you say? assuredly I shall lose you if you do not answer me; my course is taken: I leave alone.”

“Well, Octave ——”

“Well,” I exclaimed, “time, then, will justify you? Finish; to that at least say yes or no.”

“Yes, I hope so.”

“You hope so! that is what I entreat you to ask yourself sincerely. It is the last time, no doubt, that you will have the opportunity for it in my presence. You tell me that you love me, and I believe it. I suspect you; you desire that I should go and that time should justify you?”

“And of what do you suspect me?”

“I did not want to tell you, for I see that it is useless. But, after all, wretchedness for wretchedness, at your leisure: I love that equally well. You are deceiving me; you love another; that is your secret and mine.”

“Who, then?” she asked.

“Smith.”

She laid her hand on my lips and turned away. I could not say anything more about it; we both of us remained pensive, our eyes fixed on the floor.

“Listen to me,” she said with effort. “I have suffered much, and I call Heaven to witness that I would give my life for you. As long as there shall remain to me in the world the faintest glimmer of hope, I will be ready to suffer still; but even should I have to excite

your wrath anew by telling you that I am a woman, I am so, however, my love. It is not necessary to go too far ahead, nor farther than human strength. I will never answer for that. All that I can do in this instance is to go on my knees for the last time and to entreat you again to go away."

She bowed as she was saying these words. I arose.

"Quite mad," I said bitterly, "quite mad is he who, once in his life, wishes to obtain the truth from a woman! He will obtain only contempt, and he deserves it indeed! The truth! he knows it who corrupts chambermaids or who glides to their pillow at the hour when they are talking in a dream. He knows it who becomes a woman himself and whom his baseness initiates into all that goes on in darkness! But the man who asks for it frankly, he who opens a loyal hand to obtain that frightful alms, it is not he who will ever obtain it! She is on her guard with him; as the only answer she shrugs her shoulders, and, if he loses his patience, she arises in her virtue like an outraged vestal, and she lets fall from her lips the great feminine oracle, that suspicion destroys love and that one could not pardon that to which one cannot answer. Ah! just God! what fatigue! when, then, will all that end?"

"When you will," she said in an icy tone; "I am as weary of it as you."

"On the very instant; I leave you forever, and may time, then, justify you! Time! time! O cold lover!

remember this adieu. Time ! and your beauty, and your love, and happiness, where will they have gone ? Is it, then, without regret that you are thus losing me ? Ah ! no doubt, the day on which the jealous lover will know that he has been unjust, the day on which he will see the proofs, he will understand what heart he has wounded, is it not true ? he will weep for his shame, he will no longer have either joy or sleep ; he will live only to remember that he might have been able formerly to live happy. But on that day his proud mistress will grow pale, perhaps, at seeing herself avenged ; she will say to herself : ‘ If I had done it sooner ! ’ And believe me, if she had loved, pride will not console her.”

I had wanted to speak calmly, but I was no longer master of myself : in my turn I was walking agitatedly. There are certain looks that are veritable sword-thrusts, they cross each other like iron ; it was such that Brigitte and I exchanged at that moment. I was looking at her as a prisoner looks at the door of a cell. To break the seal that she had on her lips and to force her to speak, I would have exposed my own life and hers.”

“ Where are you going ? ” she asked, “ what do you want me to say to you ? ”

“ What you have in your heart. Are you not cruel enough to make me repeat it thus ? ”

“ And you, and you ! ” she exclaimed, “ are you not a hundred times more cruel ? Ah ! quite mad, you say, they who want to know the truth ! Fool, can I say in my

turn, who can hope that one believes her! You want to know my secret, and my secret is that I love you. Fool that I am! you are looking for another. This pallor that comes to me from you, you accuse it, you interrogate it. Fool! I have wanted to suffer in silence, to devote my resignation to you; I have wanted to conceal from you my tears; you spy them as witnesses of a crime. Fool! I have desired to cross the seas, to exile myself from France with you, to go and die, far from all that has loved me, on that heart which doubts me. Fool! I have believed that the truth had a look, an accent, that one divined it, that one respected it! Ah! when I think of it, the tears suffocate me. Why, if it should be thus, have drawn me on to a step which will forever disturb my rest? My brain is reeling, I know not where I am!"

Weeping, she leaned on me. "Fool! fool!" she repeated in a heart-rending voice.

"And what is it, then?" she continued; "how long will you persevere? What can I do with these suspicions that are incessantly springing up again, incessantly allayed? I must, you say, justify myself! For what? for going away, for loving, for dying, for despairing? and, if I affect a forced gayety, that very gayety offends you. I sacrifice everything to you in order to go away, and you will not have gone a league until you will look backwards. Everywhere, always, whatever I do, insult, wrath! Ah! dear child, if you knew what a mortal

cold, what a suffering it is thus to see the simplest word of the heart received with doubt and sarcasm ! You will deprive yourself thereby of the only happiness that there is in the world : to love without reserve. In the hearts of those who love you, you will kill every delicate and elevated feeling ; you will at length believe in nothing save that which is most gross ; there will remain to you of love only what is visible and is touched by the finger. You are young, Octave, and you have yet a long life to travel ; you will have other mistresses. Yes, as you say, pride is a small matter, and it is not that which will console me ; but God grant that a tear from you may pay me one day for those that you are making me shed at this moment."

She arose. "Must it then be said? is it necessary, then, that you know it, that for six months past I have not gone to bed a single evening without repeating to myself that everything was useless and that you would never be cured ; that I have not got up a single morning without saying to myself that it was necessary to try again ; that you have not spoken a word without my feeling that I ought to leave you, and that you have not given me a caress without my feeling that I preferred to die ; that, day by day, minute by minute, ever between fear and hope, I have a thousand times tried to overcome either my love or my sorrow ; that, as soon as I opened my heart to you, you cast a mocking glance into the very depths of my being, and that, as soon as I

shut it, it seemed to me that I felt a treasure which you alone could spend? Shall I relate to you those weaknesses and all those mysteries that seem puerile to those who do not respect them? that, when you left me in wrath, I shut myself up to reread your first letters; that there is a beloved waltz that I have never played in vain when I felt too keenly the impatience of seeing you come? Ah! unhappy woman! how dear all those hidden tears, all those follies so sweet to the weak, will cost you! Weep now; this very punishment, this sorrow has served to no purpose."

I wanted to interrupt her. "Allow me, allow me," she said; "a day must come when I must speak to you thus. Let us see, why do you doubt me? For six months past, in thought, in word, and in soul, I have belonged only to you. Of what do you dare to suspect me? Do you want to set out for Switzerland? I am ready, as you see. Is it a rival that you think you have? send him a letter that I will sign and that you will take to the post-office. What are we doing? where are we going? let us make a decision. Are we not always together? Well, why do you leave me? I cannot be at the same time near you and far from you. It should be, you say, that one should trust in one's mistress, and that is true. Either love is a good, or it is an evil: if it is a good, it is necessary to believe in it; if it is an evil, it is necessary to be cured of it. All that, you see, is a game that we are playing; but our heart and our

life serve as a stake, and that is horrible ! Do you want to die ? that will be the sooner done. Who am I, then, that one doubts me ? ”

She stopped in front of the glass.

“ Who am I, then ? ” she repeated, “ who am I, then ? Do you think of it ? Look, then, at this countenance.

“ Doubt thee ! ” she exclaimed, addressing her own reflection ; “ poor, pale head, they suspect thee ! poor, thin cheeks, poor wearied eyes, they doubt you and your tears ! Well, put an end to your suffering ; may those kisses that have dried you, close your eyelids ! Go down into that humid earth, poor vacillating body that no longer supports thyself ! When thou shalt be there, people will believe it, perhaps, if doubt believes in death. O sad spectre ! on what shore, then, wishest thou to wander and groan ? what is that fire that is devouring thee ? Thou art making plans of travel, thou that hast a foot in the grave ! Die ! God is thy witness that thou hast wished to love ! Ah ! what riches, what powers of love, one has awakened in thy heart ! Ah ! what a dream one has let thee enjoy, and with what poisons one has killed thee ! What evil hadst thou done that they threw thee into this ardent fever that is burning thee ? What madness, then, animates him, that enraged creature who is driving thee with his foot into the coffin, while his lips are speaking to thee of love ? What will become of thee, then, if thou still livest ? Is it not time ? is there not enough of it ?

What proof of thy grief wilt thou give for one to believe in it, when as to thyself, poor living proof, poor witness, people do not believe thee? To what torture dost thou want to subject thyself, that thou hast not already used? By what torments, what sacrifices, wilt thou appease greedy, insatiable love? Thou wilt be only an object of laughter; thou wilt seek in vain for a deserted street in which those who pass by will not point their finger at thee. Thou wilt lose all shame and even the appearance of that fragile virtue that has been so dear to thee; and the man for whom thou hast degraded thyself will be the first to punish thee for it. He will reproach thee for living for him alone, for braving the world for him, and, whilst thine own friends will murmur around thee, he will seek in their looks whether he does not perceive too much pity; he will accuse thee of deceiving him, if a hand ever presses thine, and if, in the desert of thy life, thou perchance findest any one who can bewail thee in passing. O God! does he remember one summer day on which they placed on thy head a crown of white roses? Was it that brow that wore them? Ah! this hand which hung it on the oratory walls, has not fallen into dust like it! O my valley! O my old aunt, who now sleepest in peace! O my lindens, my little white goat, my good farmers who loved me so much! do you remember having seen me so happy, proud, tranquil, and respected? Who, then, threw in my way this stranger who wants to

snatch me from them? who, then, gave him the right to pass along my village path? Ah! unhappy one! why didst thou turn around the first day that he followed thee there? why didst thou receive him as a brother? why didst thou open the door and extend thy hand to him? Octave, Octave, why hast thou loved me, if all was to end thus?"

She was near fainting, and I held her up until reaching an arm-chair, into which she fell with her head on my shoulder. The terrible effort she had just made in speaking to me so bitterly had crushed her. Instead of an outraged mistress, I suddenly found in her only a plaintive and suffering child. Her eyes were closed; I threw my arms around her, and she remained motionless.

When she regained consciousness, she complained of extreme languor and entreated me in a tender voice to leave her so that she might go to bed. She could scarcely walk; I carried her as far as the alcove and laid her down gently on her bed. There was in her no sign of suffering: she rested from her sorrow as from fatigue and did not seem to remember it. Her weak and delicate nature yielded without struggling, and, as she had said herself, I had gone farther than her strength. She held my hand in hers; I embraced her; our still loving lips were united, as it were, without our knowing it, and, on leaving a scene so cruel, she went to sleep on my heart, smiling as on the first day.

VI

Brigitte was asleep. Mute, motionless, I was seated by her pillow. As a husbandman, after a storm, counts the ears of a devastated field, so I began to go down into myself and to sound the evil that I had done.

I had no sooner thought of it than I deemed it irreparable. Certain sufferings, by their very excess, warn us of their close, and the more shame and remorse I felt, the more I felt that, after such a scene, there remained nothing but to bid each other adieu. Whatever courage Brigitte might have, she had drunk to the very dregs the bitter cup of her sad love: if I did not wish to see her die, it was necessary that she should rest from it. It had often happened that she had made me cruel reproaches, and hitherto she had, perhaps, put more wrath into them than this time; but now, what she had said to me was no longer vain words dictated by offended pride, it was the truth which, repressed in the depths of her heart, had broken it, in order to leave it. The circumstances in which we found ourselves and my refusal to go away with her rendered, moreover, all hope impossible; she would have liked to pardon, but she would not have had the strength for it. That very sleep, that passing death of a being who could suffer no more, gave enough

evidence as to that; that silence, coming all of a sudden, that sweetness which she had shown on returning so sadly to life, that pale countenance, and even that kiss, everything told me that all was over, and that whatever bond might unite us, I had broken it forever. Just as she was now sleeping, it was clear that at the first suffering which should come to her from me, she would sleep her eternal sleep. The clock struck, and I felt that the hour that had elapsed was bearing my life away with it.

Not wishing to call any one, I had lit Brigitte's lamp; I was looking at that weak glimmer, and my thoughts seemed to float in the shade like its uncertain rays.

Whatever I could say or do, never had the idea of losing Brigitte as yet presented itself to me. I had a hundred times wanted to leave her; but who has loved in this world and does not know what comes of it? It was only despair or emotions of wrath. As well as I knew that I was loved by her, I was quite sure of loving her also; the invincible necessity had, for the first time, just arisen between us two. I felt, as it were, a dull languor, in which I distinguished nothing clearly. I was crouched near the alcove, and, though I had seen from the first instant the whole extent of my misfortune, I did not feel its suffering. What my mind understood, my soul, weak and frightened, seemed to push away so as to see nothing of it. "Come," I said to myself, "that is certain; I have wished it and I have done it;

there is not the least doubt but that we can no longer live together ; I do not want to kill this woman, so I have no alternative but to leave her. See what is done, I will go away to-morrow." And, while thus speaking to myself, I thought neither of my wrongs, nor of the past, nor of the future ; I remembered neither Smith nor anything whatever at that moment ; I could not have said what had brought me there or what I had been doing for the past hour. I was looking at the walls of the room, and I believe that all that took up my attention was to find by what coach I would go away on the morrow.

I remained a rather long time in this state of strange calm. As a man struck with a dagger feels at first only the cold of the iron, he still takes a few steps on his way, and, stupefied, his eyes wandering, he asks himself what is happening to him : but gradually the blood comes drop by drop, the wound opens and lets it flow ; the ground is stained with a dark purple, death comes ; the man, on its approach, shudders with horror and falls thunderstruck. Thus, apparently tranquil, I was listening to misfortune coming ; I repeated in a low voice what Brigitte had said to me, and I was arranging around her all that I knew from habit that they prepared for her for the night ; then I looked at her, next I went to the window and I remained there with my brow pressed to the panes face to face with a great dark and heavy sky ; then I returned to the bedside. To leave

to-morrow was my only thought, and gradually that word *to leave* became intelligible to me: "Ah! God!" I suddenly exclaimed, "my poor mistress, I am losing you, and I have not known how to love you!"

At these words I started, as if it had been another person who had pronounced them; they resounded in my whole being, as does a gust of wind on a tuned harp that it is going to break. In an instant two years of suffering passed through my heart, and after them, as their consequence and their final expression, the present laid hold of me. How shall I describe such a sorrow? By a single word, perhaps, for those who have loved. I had taken hold of Brigitte's hand, and, no doubt dreaming in her sleep, she had pronounced my name.

I arose and walked through the room; a torrent of tears flowed from my eyes. I extended my arms as if to lay hold of all that past that was escaping from me. "Is it possible?" I repeated; "what! I am losing you? I can love only you. What! you are going away? it is all over forever? What! you, my life, my adored mistress, you are flying from me, I shall not see you again? Never, never!" I said aloud; and, addressing Brigitte asleep, as if she had been able to hear me: "Never, never, do not count on it; never will I consent to it! and what is it, then? why so much pride? Is there no longer any means of making reparation for the offence that I have given to you? I entreat you, let us search together. Have you not forgiven me a thousand times?"

But you love me, you could not leave, and courage will fail you. What do you want us to do, then?"

A horrible, terrifying madness suddenly took possession of me: I walked this way and that, speaking at random, seeking on the furniture some instrument of death. I fell at last on my knees and I struck my head against the bed. Brigitte moved, and I stopped at once.

"If I woke her up!" I said to myself, shuddering. "What are you doing, then, poor madman? Let her sleep until daylight; you have still one night to see her."

I resumed my place; I was so much afraid that Brigitte would awaken that I scarcely dared to breathe. My heart seemed to have stopped at the same time as my tears. I remained chilled with a cold that made me tremble, and as if to force myself to silence: "Look at her," I said to myself, "look at her, that is still allowed to thee."

I at last succeeded in calming myself, and I felt sweeter tears flowing slowly down my cheeks. To the madness that I had felt, tenderness succeeded. It seemed to me that a plaintive cry was rending the air; I leaned on the pillow and I looked at Brigitte, as if for the last time my good angel had told me to engrave in my soul the imprint of her cherished features!

How pale she was! Her long pupils, surrounded by a bluish circle, still shone, moist with tears; her figure, formerly so slight, was crouched as if under a burden;

her cheek, haggard and ash-colored, rested on her spare hand, on her weak and trembling arm ; her brow seemed to bear the imprint of that diadem of blood-stained thorns with which resignation is crowned. I remembered the cabin. How young she was, six months ago ! how gay, free, careless she was ! What had I done with all that ? It seemed to me that an unknown voice repeated to me an old romance which I had long since forgotten :

“Altra volta gieri biele,
Blanch' e rossa com' un' flore,
Ma ora no. Non son più biele,
Consumatis dal' amore.”

It was the old romance of my first mistress, and this melancholy dialect to me seemed clear for the first time. I repeated it as if I had done nothing until then but preserve it in my memory without understanding it. Why had I learned it and why did I remember it ? She was there, my faded flower, ready to die, consumed by love.

“Look at her,” I said to myself, sobbing ; “look at her ! Think of those who complain that their mistresses do not love them ; thine loves thee, she has belonged to thee ; and thou art losing her, and hast not known how to love her.”

But grief was too strong : I arose and walked again. “Yes,” I continued, “look at her ; think of those

whom weariness is devouring and who go their way to drag out afar off a sorrow that is not shared. The evils that thou art suffering, others have suffered, and nothing in thee has remained unique. Think of those who are living without mother, without relatives, without dog, without friends; of those who are seeking and do not find, of those who are weeping and whom people mock, of those who love and whom people contemn, of those who die and are forgotten. In thy presence, there, in that alcove, is resting a being whom nature had, perhaps, formed for thee. From the highest spheres of the intellect to the most impenetrable mysteries of matter and form, that soul and that body are thy brethren; for the past six months thy mouth has not spoken, thy heart has not beaten once, but a word, a heart-beat, has answered thee; and that woman whom God sent thee, as He sends the dew to the grass, she will have done nothing but glide upon thy heart. That creature who, in the face of Heaven, had come with open arms to give thee her life and her soul, she will have vanished like a shadow, and there will not remain merely the trace of her appearance. Whilst thy lips were touching hers, whilst thine arms were clasped around her neck, whilst the angels of eternal love were interlacing thee as a single being with the blood-bonds of lust, you were farther from each other than two exiles at the two extremities of the earth, separated by the whole world. Look at her, and, above all, be silent. Thou hast

still one night to see her if thy sobs do not awake her."

Gradually my brain was excited and ideas ever more and more sombre moved me and frightened me, an irresistible power dragged me on to go down into myself.

To do evil ! such, then, was the rôle that Providence had imposed upon me ! I, do evil ! I to whom my conscience, in the midst of my very madness, said, however, that I was good ! I whom a pitiless destiny was incessantly dragging on ever farther into an abyss and to whom, at the same time, a secret horror was incessantly showing the depth of that abyss into which I was falling ! I who everywhere, in spite of everything, had I committed a crime and shed the blood of those hands there, would have again repeated to myself that my heart was not guilty, that I was deceiving myself, that it was not I who was acting thus, but my destiny, my evil genius, I do not know what being who dwelt in mine, but which was not born there ! I, do evil ! For six months past I had performed this task : not a day had elapsed that I had not labored at that impious work, and I had at that very moment the proof of it before my eyes. The man who had loved Brigitte, who had offended her, then insulted, then abandoned her, left her to take her up again, filled with fears, besieged by suspicions, thrown at last on that bed of sorrow on which I saw her stretched, it was I ! I struck my heart

and, on seeing her, I could not believe in it. I looked upon Brigitte; I touched her as if to make sure that I was not deceived by a dream. My poor countenance, which I perceived in the glass, looked at me with astonishment. What, then, was that creature that appeared to me under my features? what, then, was that pitiless man who was blaspheming with my mouth and torturing with my hands? Was it he whom my mother called Octave? was it he whom formerly, at fifteen, among the woods and in the meadows, I had seen in the clear fountains over which I leaned with a pure heart, pure as the crystal of their waters?

I shut my eyes and I thought of the days of my childhood. Like a ray of sunshine that pierced a cloud, a thousand memories passed through my heart. "No," I said to myself, "I have not done that. All that surrounds me in this room is only an impossible dream." I recalled the time when I was ignorant, when I felt my heart open on my first steps in life. I remembered an old beggar who was sitting down on a stone bench in front of a farm-house door, and to whom they sometimes sent me, in the morning, after breakfast, to take the remains of our repast. I saw him reaching out his wrinkled hands, feeble and bent, blessing me as he smiled. I felt the morning wind glide over my temples, I know not what dew-like freshness fell from Heaven into my soul. Then all of a sudden I reopened my eyes, and I found again, by the glimmer of the lamp, the reality before me.

“And thou dost not believe thyself guilty?” I asked myself with horror. “O corrupt apprentice of yesterday! because thou weepst, thou believest thyself innocent? what thou takest for the testimony of thy conscience is perhaps only remorse; and what murderer does not experience it? If thy virtue calls out to thee that she is suffering, who tells thee that it is not because she feels as if she were dying? O wretched man! those far-off voices that thou hearest groan in thy heart, thou believest that they are sobs; it is perhaps only the cry of the sea-mew, the funereal bird of the storm, which the shipwreck is calling to it. Who has never related to thee the childhood of those who die covered with blood? They also were good in their day; they also lay their hands on their countenances to remember it sometimes. Thou doest evil and thou repentest of it? Nero did, when he slew his mother. Who, then, has told thee that tears wash us?”

“And indeed were it so, were it that a part of thy soul shall never belong to evil, what wilt thou do with the other which will belong to it? Thou wilt stroke with thy left hand the wounds that thy right hand will open; thou wilt make a shroud of thy virtue to bury thy crimes in it; thou wilt strike, and, like Brutus, thou wilt engrave Plato’s gabble on thy sword. As for the being who will open her arms to thee, thou wilt plunge into the bottom of her heart that boastful and already repentant weapon: thou wilt lead to the cemetery the remains

of thy passion and thou wilt scatter on their tomb the leaves of the sterile flower of thy pity ; thou wilt say to those who will see thee : ‘What do you mean? they have taught me to kill, and remark how I am still weeping for it and how God had made me better.’ Thou wilt speak of thy youth, thou wilt persuade thyself that Heaven ought to pardon thee, that thy misfortunes are involuntary, and thou wilt plead with thy nights of sleeplessness that they leave thee some little rest.

“ But who knows? thou art still young. The more thou wilt trust in thy heart, the more thy pride will lead thee astray. Behold thee to-day in the presence of the first ruin that thou art going to leave on thy way. Let Brigitte die to-morrow, thou wilt weep over her coffin ; whither wilt thou go on leaving her? Thou wilt go away for three months, perhaps, and thou wilt take a journey into Italy ; thou wilt envelop thyself in thy cloak like an Englishman troubled with the spleen, and thou wilt say to thyself some fine morning, in the recesses of an inn, after drinking, that thy remorse is appeased and that it is time to forget in order to live again. Thou who beginnest to weep too late, beware lest, one day, thou weapest no more. Who knows? let people come and banter thee about those sorrows thou believest thou hast felt ; one day, at the ball, let a pretty woman smile from pity when they shall tell her that thou rememberest a dead mistress ; mightest thou not derive some glory and take pride all of a sudden

in what is rending thy heart to-day? When the present, which makes thee shudder and which thou darest not look in the face, shall have become the past, an old story, a confused memory, mightest thou not, perchance, throw thyself some evening on thy chair, at a supper of debauchees, and relate, with a smile on thy lips, what thou hast seen with tears in thine eyes? It is thus that one drinks every shame, it is thus that one walks here below. Thou hast begun by being good, thou art weak, and thou wilt be wicked.

“My poor friend,” I said to myself from the bottom of my heart, “I have some counsel to give thee: it is, that I believe that it is necessary for thee to die. Whilst thou art good at this hour, profit by it to be no longer wicked; whilst a woman whom thou lovest is there, dying, on that bed, and whilst thou feelest horror of thyself, extend thy hand over her breast; she is still living, it is enough; shut thine eyes and open them no more; do not attend her funeral, lest to-morrow thou be not consoled for it; give thyself a dagger-stab whilst the heart that thou bearest still loves the God who made it. Is it thy youth that stops thee? and is what thou wilt spare the color of thy hair? Never let it grow white if it is not white to-night.

“And besides, what dost thou mean to do in the world? If thou leavest, whither dost thou go? What dost thou hope for, if thou remainest? Ah! is it not that while looking at that woman it seems to thee that

thou hast in thy heart a whole treasure still buried? Is it not that what thou art losing is less what was than what might have been, and that the worst of adieus is to feel that one has not said everything? That thou hadst spoken an hour ago! While the hand was at that place, thou couldst still be happy. If thou sufferedst, that thou hadst opened thy soul! if thou lovedst, that thou hadst said so! Behold thee, like the miser, dying of hunger on his treasure; thou hast shut the door, O miser; thou art debating with thyself behind thy bolts. Throw them back, then, they are solid; it is thy hand that has forged them. O madman! who hast desired and who hast possessed thy desire, thou hadst not thought of God! Thou playedst with happiness as a child with a rattle, and thou didst not reflect how rare and fragile that was that thou heldest in thy hands; thou didst disdain it, thou didst smile at it and thou didst put off enjoying it, and thou didst not count the prayers which thy good angel made during that time to preserve to thee that shadow of a day. Ah! if there be one of them in Heaven that has ever watched over thee, where is he at this moment? He is seated before an organ; his wings are half extended, his hands stretched over the ivory key-board; he commences an eternal hymn: the hymn of love and of immortal forgetfulness. But his knees are unsteady, his wings droop, his head droops like a broken reed; the angel of death has touched his shoulder, he is disappearing in immensity!

“And thou, it is at twenty-two that thou remainest alone upon the earth, when a noble and elevated love, when the strength of youth were going, perhaps, to make something of thee! When after such long fits of weariness, of sorrows so smarting, so many acts of irresolution, a youth so dissipated, thou couldst see rise over thee a tranquil and pure day; when thy life, devoted to an adored being, might be filled with a new sap, it is at this moment that everything is spoiled and vanishes before thee! Behold thee, no longer with vague desires, but with real regrets; the heart no longer empty, but depopulated! And thou hesitatest? What art thou waiting for? Since she wants no more of thy life, let thy life no longer count for anything. Since she is leaving thee, leave thou also. Let those who loved thy youth weep over thee! they are not numerous. He who was mute beside Brigitte ought to remain mute forever! Let him who passed over her heart at least keep a trace of it intact! Oh! God! if thou wishest still to live, would it not be necessary to efface it? What other course would remain to thee, in order to preserve thy miserable breath, but to finish corrupting it? Yes, now, thy life is at this price. It would be necessary for thee, in order to bear it, not only to forget love, but to unlearn that it exists; not only to renounce what has been good in thee, but to slay what still can be so; for what wouldst thou do if thou didst remember it? Thou wouldst not take a step on earth, thou wouldst not laugh,

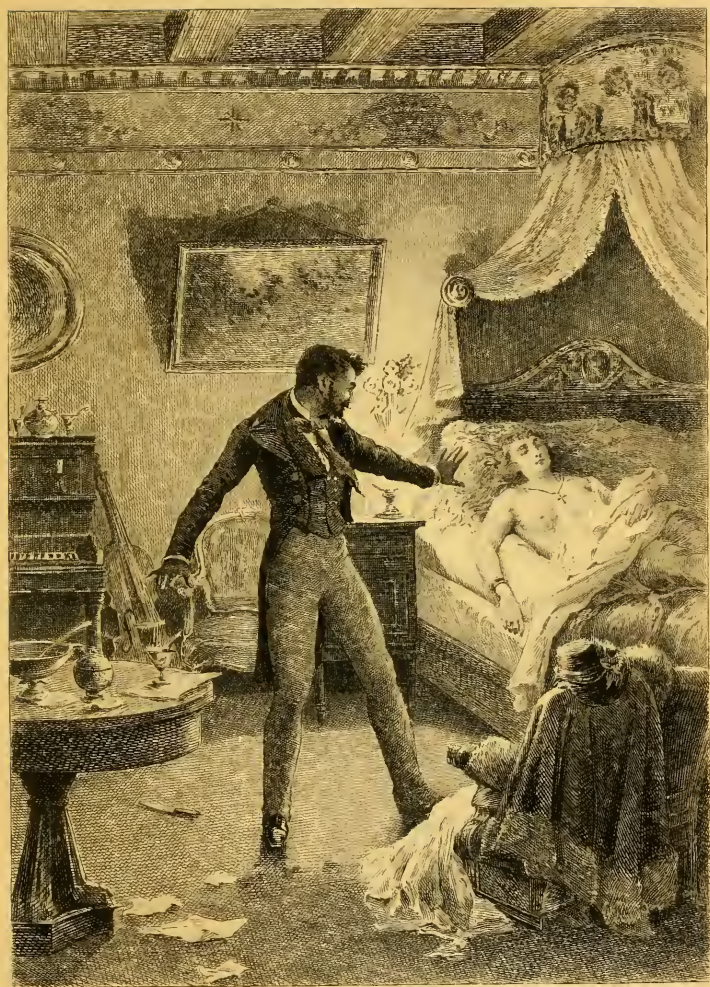
thou wouldst not weep, thou wouldst not give alms to the poor man, thou couldst not be good for a quarter of an hour without thy blood, flowing back to the heart, calling out to thee that God had made thee good so that Brigitte might be happy. Thy least actions would resound in thee, and, like sonorous echoes, would make thy misfortunes groan in it; everything that would move thy soul would awaken a regret there, and hope, that celestial messenger, that holy friend that invites us to live, would itself be changed for thee into an inexorable phantom and would become the twin brother of the past; all thy attempts to lay hold of anything would only yield a long repentance. When the homicide walks beneath the shadow, he holds his hands clasped on his breast, in dread of touching anything and that the walls may accuse him. It is thus that it would be necessary for thee to act; choose for thy soul or for thy body: thou must slay one of the two. The memory of good sends thee to evil, make of thyself a corpse if thou dost not want to be thine own ghost. O child, child! die honest! let some one be able to weep on thy tomb!"

I threw myself on the foot of the bed, full of a despair so frightful that my reason abandoned me and that I no longer knew where I was or what I was doing. Brigitte heaved a sigh, and, removing the sheet that covered her, as if oppressed with an irksome weight, she uncovered her white and naked bosom.

Part Fifth Chapter VI

*I had brought the knife that I was holding close to Brigitte's bosom ; * * * I threw back the sheet to uncover the heart, and I perceived between the two white breasts a small ebony crucifix.*

I drew back, struck with fear ; my hand opened and the weapon fell.



At this sight all my senses were deeply stirred. Was it sorrow or desire? I do not know. A horrible thought had made me shudder suddenly. "What!" I said, "to leave that to another! to die, to go down into the earth, while that white breast will breathe the air of the firmament? Just God! another hand than mine on that fine and transparent skin! another mouth on those lips and another love in that heart! Another man here at this pillow! Brigitte happy, living, adored, and I in the corner of a cemetery, falling into dust at the bottom of a grave! How long ere she forgets me if to-morrow I no longer exist? How many tears? none, perhaps! Not a friend, no one who approaches her, who does not say to her that my death is a blessing, who does not hurry to console her for it, who does not entreat her not to think of it any more! If she weeps, they will distract her; if a reminder strikes her, they will set it aside; if her love survives me in her, they will cure her of it as of a poisoning; and she herself, who on the first day will perhaps say that she wants to follow me, will turn away in a month so as not to see from afar the weeping willow that they will have planted on my grave! Why should it be otherwise? Whom does one regret when one is so beautiful? She would like to die of grief, but that fine bosom would say to her that it needs to live and a mirror would persuade her of it; and the day on which the dried-up tears will make way for the first smile, who will not

congratulate her, convalescent from her grief? Then, after a week's silence, she will begin to endure people pronouncing my name in her presence, then she will speak of it herself while looking languishingly as if to say: 'Console me;' then gradually she will have come to this: no longer to avoid my memory, but to speak no more of it, and she will open her windows, on fine spring mornings, when the birds sing in the dew; then when she will become dreamy and when she will say: 'I have loved! ——' who will be there, alongside of her? who will dare to answer her that it is necessary to love again? Ah! then I shall be there no longer! Thou wilt listen to him, faithless one! thou wilt bend, blushing, like a rose that is going to open, and thy beauty and thy youth will mount to thy brow. While saying that thy heart is closed, thou wilt let emerge from it that fresh aureola, each ray of which calls for a kiss. How much they wish to be loved, those who say that they love no longer! And is it astonishing? Thou art a woman; that body, that alabaster throat, thou knowest what they are worth, some one has told it to thee; when thou concealest them under thy dress, thou dost not believe, like virgins, that everybody resembles thee, and thou knowest the price of thy modesty. How can the woman who has been extolled resolve to be so no longer? does she believe herself alive if she remains in the shade and if there be silence around her beauty? Her very beauty

is the praise and the look of her lover. No, no, it must not be doubted; he who has loved, no longer lives without love; he who learns of a death, clings to life. Brigitte loves me, and would perhaps die of it; I shall kill myself, and another will have her.

“Another, another!” I repeated as I leaned over, resting on the bed, and my brow brushed her shoulder. “Is she not a widow?” I thought; “has she not already seen death? have not those delicate little hands cared for and buried? Her tears know how long they last, and the second last not so long. Ah! God preserve me! while she sleeps, what matters it if I slay her? If I woke her up now and if I told her that her hour had come and that we were going to die in a last kiss, she would accept. What matters it to me? Is it certain, then, that everything does not end there?”

I had found a knife on the table and I was holding it in my hand.

“Fear, cowardice, superstition! what do they know of it, those who say so. It is for the people and the ignorant that they speak to us of another life, but who believes in it in the bottom of his heart? What guardian of our cemeteries has seen a dead man leave his tomb and go and knock at the priest’s door? It was of old that people saw ghosts; the police forbade them in our civilized cities, and there no longer spring from the bosom of the earth but living persons buried in haste. Who could have made death mute if it had ever spoken?

Is it because processions have no longer the right to encumber our streets, that the celestial spirit allows itself to forget? To die, that is the end, the object. God has laid it down, men discuss it; but each bears written on the brow: 'Do what thou wilt, thou shalt die.' What would they say of it, if I killed Brigitte? Neither she nor I would hear anything of it. There would be to-morrow in a newspaper that Octave de T—— had killed his mistress, and the day after one would no longer speak of it. Who would follow us in the last escort? No one who, on returning home, would not breakfast peacefully; and we, stretched side by side in the heart of that mud of a day, the world might walk over us without the noise of their footsteps awaking us. Is it not true, my dearly beloved, is it not true that we should be well there? It is a downy bed, the earth; no suffering would reach us there; they would not gabble in the neighboring tombs, of our union before God; our bones would embrace each other in peace and without pride: death is a consoler, and what it joins is not loosed. Why should oblivion frighten thee, poor body that is promised to it? Each hour that strikes draws thee to it, each step that thou takest, breaks the rung on which thou hast just supported thyself; thou feedest only on dead bodies; the air of Heaven bears thee down and crushes thee, the earth that thou tramplest on draws thee to it by the soles of thy feet. Descend, descend! why so much dread? Is it a

word that gives you horror? Say only: 'We will live no more.' Is there not in life a great fatigue from which it is sweet to rest? How does it happen that one hesitates, if there be only the difference between a little sooner and a little later? Matter is imperishable, and physicists, they tell us, infinitely torture the smallest grain of dust without ever being able to annihilate it. If matter be the property of chance, what evil does it do in changing tortures, since it cannot change masters? What matters to God the form that I have received and what livery is worn by my sorrow? Suffering lives in my cranium; it belongs to me, I kill it; but the skeleton does not belong to me, and I give it back to Him who lent it to me: let a poet make of it a cup from which he will drink his new wine! What reproach can I incur, and who would make that reproach to me? What inflexible judge will come to tell me what I have abused? What does he know of it? Was he in me? If each creature has his task to perform, and if it is a crime to shirk it, what great culprits, then, are the children who die on the nurse's bosom? why are those spared? For what would the lesson serve of accounts rendered after death? It would be necessary, indeed, that Heaven should be deserted in order that man be punished for having lived, for it is enough that he has to live, and I know not who has asked for it, if not Voltaire on his death-bed: worthy and last cry of powerlessness from a desperate old atheist. What is the use? why so

many struggles? who, then, is above, who is looking at and who is pleased with so many agonies? who, then, makes merry and stands idle at that spectacle of a creation ever nascent and ever moribund? to build, forsooth, and the grass grows; to plant, and the thunder falls; to march, and death calls: 'Hold!'; to weep, and the tears are dried; to love, and the countenance is wrinkled; to pray, to prostrate, to supplicate, and to extend the arms, and the harvests have not a blade of wheat the more! Who is it, then, who has done so much for the pleasure of knowing all alone that what he has done is nothing? The earth is dying. Herschel says that it is from cold: who, then, holds in his hand that drop of condensed vapor and looks at it drying up, as a fisherman does with a little sea-water, so as to get a grain of salt from it? That great law of attraction which suspends the world in its place uses it and gnaws it in an endless desire; each planet bears its own miseries while creaking on its axle; they are called from one end of the heavens to the other, and, uneasy of rest, seek which will be the first to stop. God holds them in check; they assiduously and eternally accomplish their void and useless labor; they turn, they suffer, they burn, they are extinguished and are lighted, they descend and remount, they follow one another and shun one another, they interlace like rings; they carry on their surface thousands of beings renewed incessantly; those beings are agitated, cross one another also, are pressed for an hour, some against

the others, then fall, and others rise ; where life is wanting, it hastens ; where the air feels the void, it precipitates itself ; not a disorder, everything is regulated, marked, written in lines of gold and in parabolas of fire, everything marches to the sound of the celestial music on pitiless paths and forever ; and all that is nothing ! And we, poor nameless dreams, pale and sorrowful appearances, imperceptible ephemera, we whom one animates with momentary breath, that death may exist, we exhaust ourselves with fatigue to prove to ourselves that we are playing a part and that something indescribable takes notice of us. We hesitate to draw on our breast a little instrument of iron and to knock off our heads with a shrug of the shoulders ; it seems that if we kill ourselves, chaos is going to be re-established ; we have written and drawn up the divine and human laws, and we are afraid of our catechisms ; we suffer for thirty years without murmuring, and we believe that we are struggling ; at last, suffering is the stronger, we send a pinch of powder into the sanctuary of the intellect, and there grows a flower on our tomb."

As I finished these words, I had brought the knife that I was holding close to Brigitte's bosom. I was no longer master of myself, and I do not know, in my delirium, what might have come of it ; I threw back the sheet to uncover the heart, and I perceived between the two white breasts a small ebony crucifix.

I drew back, struck with fear ; my hand opened and the weapon fell. It was Brigitte's aunt, who, on her death-bed, had given that little crucifix to her. I did not remember, however, having ever seen it on her ; no doubt, at the moment of leaving, she had hung it on her neck, as a relic preservative from the dangers of travel. I joined my hands all of a sudden and felt myself bend towards the floor. "Lord my God," I said trembling, "Lord my God, you were there !"

Let those who do not believe in Christ read this page ; neither did I believe in Him. Neither as a child, nor at college, nor as a man, had I frequented the churches ; my religion, if I had one, had neither rite nor creed, and I believed only in a God without form, without worship, and without revelation. Poisoned, from adolescence, with all the writings of the last century, I had early sucked from them the sterile milk of impiety. Human pride, that God of the egoist, closed my mouth to prayer, while my frightened soul took refuge in the hope of nothingness. I was as if intoxicated and mad when I saw the Christ on Brigitte's bosom ; but, though not believing in Him myself, I drew back, knowing that she believed in Him. It was not a vain terror that at that moment stopped my hand. Who saw me ? I was alone, at night. Was there thought of the prejudices of the world ? who prevented me from taking my eyes away from that piece of black wood ? I could throw it into the ashes, but it was my weapon that I threw there.

Ah! how I felt it in my very soul, and how I feel it even now! what wretches are the men who have ever made a mockery of what can save a being! What matter the name, the form, the belief? Is not all that is good sacred? Why do people dare to touch God?

As at a beam of the sun the snow descends from the mountains, and from the glacier that menaced the heavens issues a stream which reaches the valley, so descended into my heart a spring that spread. Repentance is a pure incense; it was exhaled from all my suffering. Though I had almost committed a crime, as soon as my hand was disarmed, I felt my heart innocent. A single instant had given back to me calm, strength, and reason; I advanced anew towards the alcove; I leaned over my idol and I kissed her crucifix.

"Sleep in peace," I said to her, "God is watching over thee! Whilst a dream was making thee smile, thou hast just escaped the greatest danger that thou hast run in thy life. But the hand that menaced thee will not do evil to any one; I swear it by thy Christ, Himself, I will kill neither you nor myself! I am a fool, a madman, a child who believed himself a man. God be praised! thou art young and living, and thou art beautiful, and thou wilt forget me. Thou wilt get well of the evil that I have done thee, if thou canst pardon it. Sleep in peace until daylight, Brigitte, and then decide our destiny; whatever be the sentence that thou pronouncest, I will submit to it without a murmur. And

Thou, Jesus, who hast saved her, forgive me, do not tell it to her. I was born in an impious age, and I have much to expiate. Poor Son of God whom people forget, they did not teach me to love Thee. I have never sought Thee in the temples; but, thank Heaven, where I find Thee, I have not yet learned not to tremble. Once before dying I shall at least have kissed with my lips a heart that is full of Thee. Protect it as long as it may breathe; remain there, holy safeguard; remember that an unhappy man has not dared to die of his grief on seeing Thee nailed to Thy cross; an impious man Thou hast saved from evil; if he had believed, Thou wouldst have consoled him. Pardon those who have made him an unbeliever, since Thou hast made him repentant; pardon all those who blaspheme; they have never seen Thee, no doubt, when they were in despair! Human joys are mockeries, they pitilessly disdain; O Christ! the fortunate ones of this world think they never have need of Thee! pardon: when their pride outrages Thee, their tears baptize them sooner or later; pity them for believing themselves sheltered from storm and for having need of the severe lessons of misfortune, in order to come to Thee. Our wisdom and our skepticism are in our hands—the great playthings of children; pardon us for dreaming that we are impious, Thou who didst smile on Golgotha. Of all our miseries of an hour, the worst is, for our vanities, that they try to forget Thee. But, Thou seest, they are only shadows

that a look from Thee banishes. Thyself, hast Thou not been a man? It was sorrow that made Thee God; it was an instrument of punishment that served Thee to ascend to Heaven and that bore Thee with open arms into the bosom of Thy glorious Father; and we, it is also sorrow that leads us to Thee, as it led Thee to Thy Father; we come only crowned with thorns to bow before Thy image; we touch Thy bleeding feet only with blood-stained hands, and Thou hast suffered martyrdom to be loved by the unfortunate."

The first rays of dawn were beginning to appear; everything was gradually awakening, and the air was filled with distant and confused noises. Weak and exhausted from fatigue, I was going to leave Brigitte so as to take a little rest. As I was going out, a dress thrown on an arm-chair slipped to the floor near me, and there fell from it a folded paper. I picked it up; it was a letter, and I recognized Brigitte's hand. The envelope was not sealed, and I opened it and read what follows:

"December 23, 18—

"When you receive this letter, I shall be far from you, and perhaps you will never receive it. My destiny is bound up with that of a man to whom I have sacrificed everything; for him, to live without me is impossible, and I am going to try and die for him. I love you; adieu, pity us."

I turned over the paper after having read it, and I saw on the address :

“To Monsieur Henri Smith, at N——, Poste Restante.”

VII

Next day, at noon, in a fine December sun, a young man and a woman who were linked arm in arm crossed the Palais-Royal garden. They entered a jeweler's shop, where they chose two rings that were alike, and, exchanging them with a smile, put one on each other's finger. After a short walk they went to have breakfast at the *Frères Provençaux*, in one of those little upper rooms from which one discovers, in all its entirety, one of the most beautiful places in the world. There, shut up in familiar converse, when the waiter had retired, they were elbow to elbow at the window and gently pressed each other's hands. The young man was in traveling costume ; seeing the joy that appeared on his countenance, one would have taken him for a newly-married man showing for the first time to his young wife the life and pleasures of Paris. His gayety was sweet and calm as always is that of happiness. He who had experience would have recognized the child

who becomes a man and whose more confident look begins to strengthen the heart. From time to time he contemplated the heavens, then returned to his love, and tears shone in his eyes ; but he let them flow down his cheeks and smiled without wiping them away. The woman was pale and pensive, she was looking only at her friend. There was on her features, as it were, a profound suffering which, without her making any efforts to conceal it, did not, however, resist the gayety that showed itself. When her companion smiled, she smiled also, but not all alone ; when he spoke, she answered him, and she ate what he served to her ; but there was in her a silence that seemed to live only at instants. By her languor and her indifference one clearly distinguished that softness of soul, that sleep of the weaker of two beings who love each other, and one of whom exists only in the other and is animated only by an echo. The young man was not deceived in that, and seemed proud and grateful for it ; but one saw by his very pride that his happiness was new to him. When the woman suddenly became sad and drooped her eyes towards the floor, he strove, in order to reassure her, to assume an open and resolute air ; but he could not always succeed in that, and was himself sometimes disturbed. That mingling of strength and weakness, of joy and sorrow, of trouble and serenity, would have been impossible to understand on the part of an indifferent spectator ; one could have believed them in turn the two happiest

beings on earth and the most unhappy; but, being ignorant of their secret, one would have felt that they were suffering together, and, whatever was their mysterious pain, one saw that they had put on their sorrows a seal more powerful than love itself, friendship. Whilst they were clasping each other's hand, their looks remained chaste; though they were alone, they spoke in a low voice. As if overwhelmed by their thoughts, they laid their brows one against the other, and their lips did not touch each other. They looked at each other with a tender and solemn air, like the weak who want to be good. When the clock struck one, the woman heaved a deep sigh, and, turning half around:

"Octave," she said, "if you were mistaken!"

"No, my dear," the young man replied, "be sure of it, I am not mistaken. It will be necessary for you to suffer a great deal, for a long time perhaps, and for me always; but both of us will get cured of it: you by time, I by God."

"Octave, Octave," the woman repeated, "are you sure of not being mistaken?"

"I do not believe, my dear Brigitte, that we could forget ourselves; but I believe that at this moment we cannot yet forgive each other, and yet that is what is necessary at any price, even at never seeing each other again."

"Why should we not see each other again? Why one day —— You are so young!"

She added with a smile :

“ In your first love, we will see each other without danger.”

“ No, my friend ; for, know it well, I will never see you again without love. May he to whom I leave you, to whom I give you, be worthy of you ! Smith is brave, good, and honest ; but, whatever love you have for him, you see clearly that you still love me ; for, if I wished to remain or to take you away, you would consent to it.”

“ That is true,” the woman repeated.

“ True ? true ? ” replied the young man as he looked at her with his whole soul ; “ true, if I wished, you would come with me ? ”

Then he continued tenderly :

“ For this reason it is necessary for us never to meet again. There are certain loves in life that upset the head, the senses, the mind, and the heart ; among all of them there is only one that does not trouble, that penetrates, and that one dies only with the being in whom it has taken root.”

“ But you will write to me, however ? ”

“ Yes, at first for some time, for what I have to suffer is so severe that the absence of every habitual and loved form would kill me now. It is gradually and measuredly that, unknown to you, I have approached, not without fear, that I have become more familiar, that, in fine — Let us not speak of the past. It is gradually that my letters will be more rare, until the day when

they will cease. I will thus again go down the hill that I have climbed for a year past. There will be in that a great sorrow, and perhaps also some charm. When one stops, in the cemetery, in front of a fresh and verdant grave, on which are engraved two cherished names, one feels a sorrow full of mystery that makes the tears flow without bitterness; it is thus that I sometimes want to remember having been alive."

The woman, at these last words, threw herself into an arm-chair and sobbed. The young man melted into tears; but he remained motionless and as if not wishing himself to notice her sorrow. When the tears had ceased, he approached his friend, took hold of her hand and kissed it.

"Believe me," he said, "to be loved by you, whatever be the name that the place bears which one occupies in your heart, that gives strength and courage. Never doubt it, my Brigitte, no one will understand you better than I; another will love you more worthily, no one will love you more deeply. Another will respect in you qualities that I offend, he will surround you with his love; you will have a better lover, you will not have a better brother. Give me your hand, and let the world laugh at a sublime word that it does not understand: 'Let us remain friends, and adieu forever.' When for the first time we clasped each other in our arms, a long time had already elapsed since something of ourselves knew that we were going to be united. Let

not this part, which has embraced before God, know that we are leaving each other on earth ; let a miserable quarrel of an hour not unbind our eternal happiness ! ”

He was holding the woman's hand ; she arose, still bathed in tears ; and, advancing in front of the glass with a strange smile, she drew out her scissors and cut from her head a long tress of hair ; then she looked at herself for a moment, thus disfigured and deprived of a part of her most beautiful decking, and gave it to her lover.

The clock struck again ; it was time to go down ; when they again passed under the galleries, they appeared as joyous as when they had arrived.

“ This is a beautiful sun,” said the young man.

“ And a beautiful day,” said Brigitte, “ which nothing will efface from there ! ”

She struck her heart energetically ; they hurried on and disappeared in the crowd. An hour later a post-chaise passed over a little hill, behind the Fontainebleau barrier. The young man was there alone ; he looked for a last time at his natal city in the distance and thanked God for having permitted that, of three beings who had suffered through his fault, but one remained unhappy.

NOTES

¹ The cemetery for executed criminals.

² Formerly I was beautiful, white and red as a flower, but now, no. I am no longer beautiful, consumed with love.

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